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The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series

Justin Meyer

JUSTIN MEYER AND SILVER OAK CELLARS: FOCUS ON CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Interviews Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1999

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

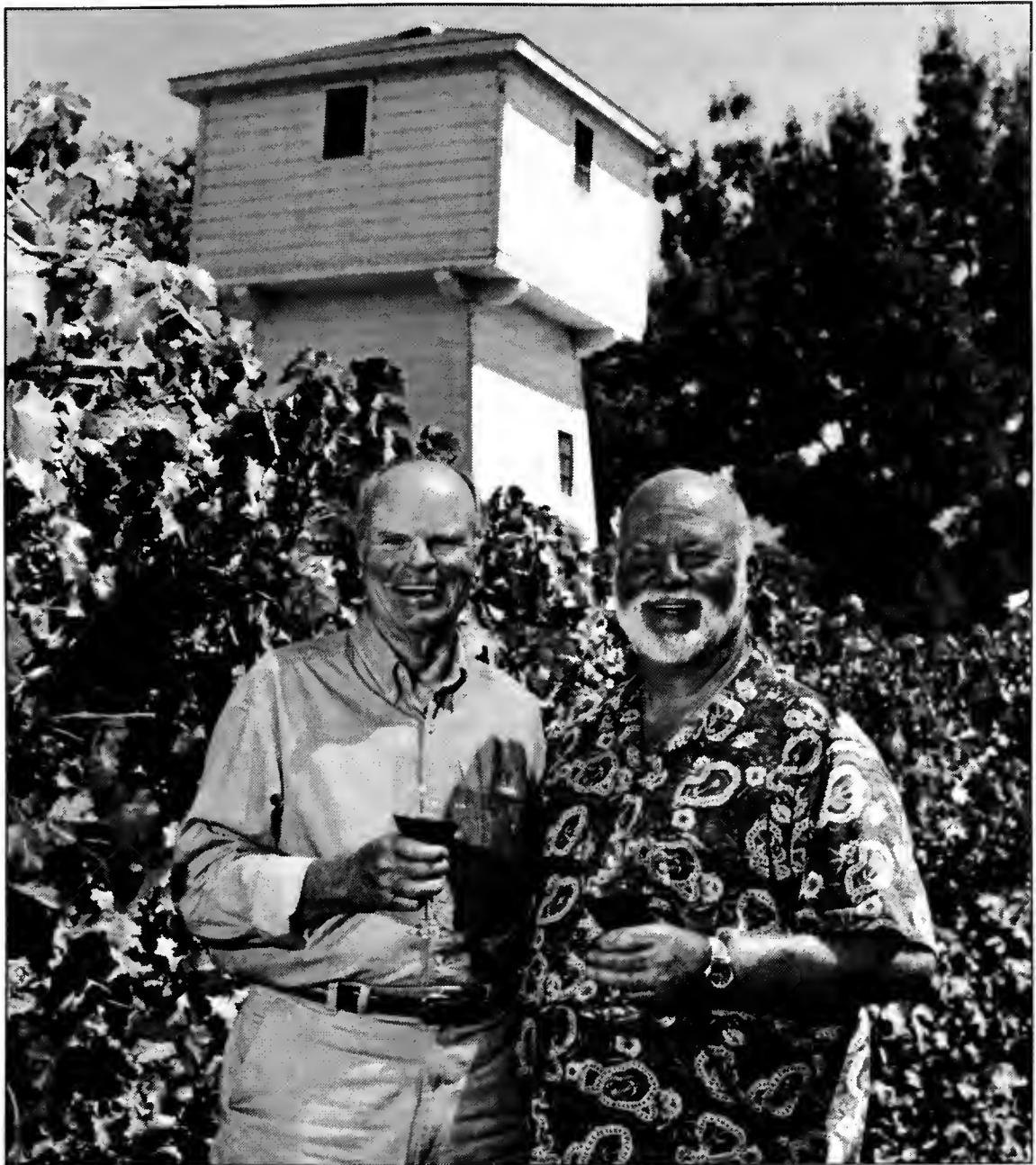
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Interviewed in 1999 by Carole Hicke for the Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series, the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated by Ruth Teiser in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed has been made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Carole Hicke, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

Until her death in June 1994, Ruth Teiser was project originator, initiator, director, and conductor of the greater part of the oral histories. Her book, Winemaking in California, co-authored with Catherine Harroun and published in 1982, was the product of more than forty years of research, interviewing, and photographing. (Those wine history files are now in The Bancroft Library for researcher use.) Ruth Teiser's expertise and knowledge of the wine industry contributed significantly to the documenting of its history in this series.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grapegrowing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of winemen. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his or her own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Carole Hicke
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Wine
Oral History Series

July 1998
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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INTERVIEW HISTORY--Justin Meyer

Under the reign of Justin Meyer, Silver Oak Cellars has successfully pioneered the concept of a one-wine winery. Meyer's first love is Cabernet Sauvignon, and when he started his Napa Valley winery in 1972, he believed that Cabernet grapes do best in that Valley. Why grow anything else?

A native of Bakersfield, California, Meyer joined the Christian Brothers as a novice, and went to St. Mary's College in Moraga, California, owned by the Brothers. With a degree in Economics, he taught high school for three years, he was drafted to join Brother Timothy at the Mont La Salle winery in 1964. The Brothers put him into every winery job there was, then sent him to the University of California at Davis for a degree in Viticulture and Enology, then a master's in Horticulture.

Back at the Christian Brothers winery, he handled all the management jobs, from grape growing to production--in the laboratory analyzing wine, out in the field buying grapes and planting vineyards, running the operations and negotiating with the United Farm Workers. Christian Brothers wanted mass production--many varietals--and also top quality, high prices with low costs, and it finally became too much for Meyer. He left to form Silver Oak Cellars.

Meyer found a partner, Ray Duncan, who already owned some vineyards and wanted Meyer to make wine. They started operations in 1972 in a dairy milking barn, using first grapes from Alexander Valley, then developing vineyards in the Napa Valley. "My vision was that wine is food and it should taste good," he reports in this oral history. And to that end, he takes care to take all the steps to insure quality.

Meyer and Duncan owned Franciscan Vineyards, another Napa Valley winery, from 1975-1981. And he has written a book, *Plain Talk About Fine Wine*, which has been out of print, but is now being reprinted.

Meyer's wife, Bonny, has been involved in some of the winery operations, and he has three children. He was interviewed in his office in the winery on December 2 and 3, 1999. His windows overlook the vineyard that has constituted so much of his life. But he comes in only twice a week now, preferring to devote time to his family. "I consider family top priority, and I don't let my work or anything interfere with it," he maintains. "It's why we close on Sundays and on holiday weekends."

Meyer reviewed the draft transcript, made a few corrections, and returned it promptly.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Willa K. Baum, Division Head, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carole Hicke
Interviewer/Editor

September 2000
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Justin Raymond Meyer
 Date of birth 11-11-38 Birthplace Bakersfield, CA
 Father's full name Raymond Joseph Meyer
 Occupation Santa Fe Railroad Birthplace Bakersfield, CA
 Mother's full name Edith Marie Hauptman
 Occupation Housewife Birthplace Bakersfield, CA
 Your spouse Barbara (Bonny) Lynn Smith
 Occupation Marketing Birthplace El Centro, CA
 Your children Chadwick (24) Matthew (22)
Holly (18)
 Where did you grow up? Bakersfield, CA
 Present community Napa, CA
 Education B.A. Economics St Marys Monastery
B.S. Viticulture UCD, M.S. Horticulture UCD
 Occupation(s) Fresh Winegrower - Silver Oak
Cellars
 Areas of expertise grapes & Wine

Other interests or activities

Flying, Gardening,
Fly fishing, Play Piano & guitar

Organizations in which you are active

AVF, ASKV Napa
Wine Tech, Wine Dist Board

INTERVIEW WITH JUSTIN MEYER

I BACKGROUND

[Interview 1: December 2, 1999] ##¹

Grandparents

Hicke: Let's start with when and where you were born.

Meyer: I was born and raised in Bakersfield, California. Born November 11, 1938, left town in 1957, and have been living in Napa Valley ever since.

Hicke: Tell me what you can remember about your ancestors--grandparents, great-grandparents?

Meyer: My paternal grandfather, along with other things, was in oil exploration. He went to North Dakota and basically went broke looking for oil and moved to California. My partner, Ray Duncan, and I are in the oil exploration business, and we hit oil big-time just about forty miles from where he was, but in those days, they were digging at 5,000 feet and we hit at 10,000--so the technology has changed considerably.

Hicke: What was his name?

Meyer: His name was Meyer. John Meyer.

My maternal grandfather worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad in Bakersfield. My father also worked for the Santa Fe Railroad in Bakersfield. His name was Raymond Meyer.

Hicke: What was your maternal grandfather's name?

Meyer: He was also John. John Hauptman.

¹## This symbol indicates that a tape or tape segment has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Hicke: Thank you.

Parents

Meyer: So I come from pretty much German stock. Some of them came here by way of Minnesota, Dakota, California. As far as I know, my parents were both born in Bakersfield and went through high school there and got married. I was born there and raised there.

Hicke: Tell me about your mother. What was her name?

Meyer: Hauptman. Edith Hauptman.

Hicke: What are your recollections of her?

Meyer: Well, she was a working mother. Both my parents worked--my father at Santa Fe railroad, and she worked primarily at a dry cleaners about a block from the house, so we were pretty much on our own when we were kids.

Sports was a big thing. Seemed like we played ball all the time--either football or baseball--in the street. I think she tried to do a good job, but she was also busy being a housewife and working mother. I don't know that I have much of a memory.

Hicke: What kinds of things did you like for her to cook? That's always appropriate to put in here--people's memories of their growing up.

Meyer: You know, before I left home, we lived with my grandmother, because her husband had died and she wanted to stay in the house, so we moved out of our own house and lived with her while I was going through eighth grade and high school, and I recall her doing a lot of the cooking because my mother was working.

We lived in a neighborhood that had a lot of Mexican Americans in the neighborhood, and I much prefer that kind of food anyway. My mother would say to me, "You can't eat at any of those peoples' houses. They can't afford to feed you."

And I said, "Well, I like their food better than ours, though." [laughter] And a few beans and potatoes and tortillas don't cost much.

Growing Up in Bakersfield

Meyer: I went through a Catholic grammar school in east Bakersfield named St. Joseph School. I don't know if it's still there or not. Then I went on to seventh through twelfth grade at a school named Garces High School. It was run then by Christian Brothers, and Dominican nuns taught the girls. And like I say, in those days athletics were my whole life. I don't remember too much about school other than keeping my grades high enough to play football and baseball. I was class president most of the years that I was there. I ran for student body president and didn't win it.

Hicke: What did being class president involve?

Meyer: Well, we used to have periodic class meetings to decide what we were going to do, if anything, as a class project, and I ran that and organized the things that we decided to do.

Hicke: What were some of your projects?

Meyer: Oh, we used to have food drives for the poor at Thanksgiving, clothing drives and a mission drive, where we would give money and send it to the poor missions, things like that.

Hicke: How about social activities?

Meyer: Oh, we had the usual dances. And what else do you have in high school? I was fairly active in them.

Hicke: As class president did you have to plan some of those?

Meyer: No. Usually the student body did that, except for the times they would have dances of the kind that were put on by particular classes. If your class was sponsoring the dance, then you were in charge of hiring the band and various things--how it was going to run, manning it, and so on.

Hicke: What were some of your favorite classes?

Meyer: Football and baseball. [laughter]

Hicke: And recess, of course!

Meyer: I would say that I wasn't a terrific student. I was an okay student, and I enjoyed math, because I enjoyed one of the brothers that taught me math, and I enjoyed Spanish because I already spoke some Spanish. But, as I say, school to me was kind of a necessary evil to stay eligible for sports. I really didn't blossom into

liking school until I went to college and got into some things I liked. I majored--well, we'll get to that later.

Hicke: Sometimes that has more to do with the teachers than the actual subjects.

Meyer: Yes, and that's why I eventually became a Christian Brother, a monk of the Catholic Church, because I had brothers who taught me and coached me in high school, and I really respected them. I decided that would be a good life--to work with teenagers all your life and cause you to stay young just trying to keep up with them. So I entered the Christian Brothers in 1957, February, with the idea of being a teacher and coach.

Hicke: Let me back up to high school here. What position did you play on the football team?

Meyer: I was a running back in football, and an outfielder and a pitcher in baseball.

Hicke: What other schools did you play? Some around the Valley?

Meyer: Yes, down south of Fresno, closer to Bakersfield: Wasco, Arvin, Shafter, North High in Bakersfield, and some others that I can't really remember. But this school--number one, they were in about a fifty-mile radius of us, and number two, they weren't dissimilar in population, although I think we were always the smallest school. We got thrown out of the league we were in because we won it too often. So they kicked us upstairs and then we were competing with schools four times our size, and it got a little rougher.

Hicke: You must have had a really good coach.

Meyer: We did have one very good one. Unfortunately my senior year he left and went somewhere else and we got one we didn't like so well. We didn't do so well in our senior year.

Hicke: Did you have to play in that Valley heat? Through the season?

Meyer: Yes. Yes, in fact, I remember the coach used to take us out to Bakersfield Beach, and the Kern River was dry in those days. [tape interruption] We used to go down to Bakersfield Beach, which was mostly dry, and in the fall when football would start, the late summer, the fall, we'd go down and practice in the sand. That would really tire you out and make you strong, running in the sand.

[Looking at outline] As far as chores and early work experience, I worked most of my life, because my parents weren't well off and if I wanted anything, I mostly had to buy it myself. I started with a paper route in about the seventh grade.

Hicke: What paper?

Meyer: *L.A. Times*. Then I was a pearl diver at a restaurant.

Hicke: A pearl diver?

Meyer: A dishwasher. [laughter]

Hicke: I hadn't heard that before.

Meyer: Then my uncle owned a sheet metal manufacturing plant and my last couple of years I worked in summer vacation time for him, like installing coolers and duct work up in attics. It was really hot. Made me decide I wanted an education.

Hicke: Yes, anything to get out of the attic.

Well, let me ask you this. What kind of values did your parents pass on to you? Like education--were they interested in that or not?

Meyer: Well, my father was pretty crude and rough and tough, and he was a laborer for the railroad, and he told me very clearly if I didn't get an education he'd kick my butt until my nose bled. [laughs]

Hicke: Well, that's certainly instilling a value. [laughs]

Meyer: That shaped me up real quick. I don't recall my parents ever hitting me, but he was about 280 pounds, six foot two, and just strong as a horse, so when he talked, I listened. He was very insistent.

I think he came from a family of about twelve kids, and his youngest brother wrote some books and taught sheet metal at the local community college, and so he said, "You go with your uncle. He's the only one in the family with any brains." So I worked for a while for Uncle Leo, and went on to get an education, although I often wonder what would have happened to me had I not joined the Christian Brothers.

II CHRISTIAN BROTHERS

Training as a Novice

Meyer: Joining the Christian Brothers, they owned the St. Mary's College in Moraga and it was mandatory that you went there for your education, so I went there and majored in economics and minored in Spanish.

Hicke: You joined the Brothers before you went to College?

Meyer: Yes, I was only eighteen, just out of high school when I came to Mont La Salle, which is eight miles west of Napa, where Brother Timothy is now retired. That was what they called the novitiate, and I trained there for a brother's life. Then after a year and a half there, I went to St. Mary's College for three and a half years.

Hicke: Wait a minute. What was the training?

Meyer: Well, it's mostly to do with religious life. You know, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. And you'd better make sure you want to do that. The first years there are what they call temporary vows. You just take them for one year, and one year, and then three years.

Then I left. I decided not to be a brother anymore after fifteen years.

Hicke: But meanwhile you lived at the--is this a monastery?

Meyer: Yes. Yes, Mont La Salle is strictly monastarian. At St. Mary's the brothers have their own residence, so we didn't mingle a lot with the students. We went to class with them.

Hicke: What were your duties at Mont La Salle?

Meyer: Duties?

Hicke: Yes, didn't you have duties as a novice?

Meyer: Oh, you got jobs, but they changed about every month. I did everything from build a rock wall to being sacristan. I was a choir director a couple of years at St. Mary's College, and I learned that at Mont La Salle, so you did a lot of things. Everybody got a job that was a certain work period each day, and you went to your job and did it, whether it was in the refectory, in the chapel, or out building rock walls--retaining walls--so I did a lot of things.

Hicke: So obedience was pretty significant. They told you what to do and you--

Meyer: Yes, yes.

Hicke: That was probably part of the training?

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: And were there other novices there?

Meyer: There were probably, oh, twenty of us at Mont La Salle. And there were probably sixty student Brothers at St. Mary's College when I went there.

Hicke: Were they mostly older than you?

Meyer: Oh, we covered the four years of college, and they were generally not more than three years older than me. Some of them my age. Then we had a couple of Brothers in charge of the student brothers. Even there you combined the college life with a spiritual life: a certain amount of time in meditation and spiritual reading and prayer. We'd get up at five a.m. and go to bed at nine p.m. and cram all our college work in between.

Hicke: Did you have to do those midnight--

Meyer: No, we didn't have to do--the chant?

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: What they call the offices?

Hicke: Yes, all the seven offices.

Meyer: We used to do Matins and Lauds at five or six o'clock a.m. and we'd do Vespers and Compline at our night prayer, but the rest we didn't do. We weren't required to do it as part of our program, like the priests maybe.

St. Mary's College

Hicke: Okay. So off to college after this year and a half training.

Meyer: So I went down to St. Mary's, and I spent three and a half years there, because we also had to attend summer school--it was mandatory. So we finished in three and a half years.

Hicke: What did you study?

Meyer: I majored in economic theory and I minored in Spanish. As I say, our day was pretty well filled between classes, homework, and spiritual things, so we didn't have much social life. We weren't supposed to. And I got out of there in February--January or February of '62 I graduated.

Hicke: Did you do any sports?

Meyer: We couldn't at St. Mary's. They wouldn't let the Brothers participate. I was friends with the baseball coach, and I used to go out in my free time and work on the baseball fields as a groundskeeper, but they wouldn't let us participate in college sports.

Hicke: That must have been a little tough for you.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: Any particular professors or classes that you remember?

Meyer: Well, I had one, old Brother Jerome, whom I enjoyed very much. He was my prime teacher in economic theory--Keynesian economics, as I recall. And I enjoyed him a lot. Then I used to always take some elective every year, because we generally didn't get off campus too much, and the word was around that there were certain brothers who taught at the college who if you took their classes they required you as part of the class to go hear this opera or see this play. And so [laughs] you would take that class, so we could say, "Well, I have to do this for class." So I always took a music class, or I took a couple of play-writing/play-directing classes. I was also a set builder. We couldn't participate in

the plays either, but I built the sets a couple of times for the college play.

Hicke: So you had a little artistic flair.

Meyer: A little bit. Yes, I still play banjo and guitar. My wife does, also. We mostly play at church. We lead the music there.

Hicke: Did you write any plays in these classes?

Meyer: Oh, I tried, but I wasn't very successful at that. Not my forte.

Hicke: What did you plan to do with economic theory?

Meyer: Well, they pretty much gave us free reign of what we took. Up 'til then not too many people had majored in economics, because there was no place for it in the high schools. I don't know exactly why they let me do it, but I did enjoy it, and I took enough bookkeeping and other classes that when I went out to teach, I could teach some simple math as one of my courses. I taught a lot of Spanish and of course religion class. I had one homeroom and a religion class every year.

Teaching High School

Hicke: So you planned to teach.

Meyer: Yes, I planned to teach.

Hicke: Was that where most of these novices were headed?

Meyer: Yes. There were, I don't know how many high schools in California. We were what is called the West Coast Province of the Christian Brothers, and the schools extended from Los Angeles to Portland.

The purpose of the winery was--no matter what tuition you charged, these schools always ran a deficit, and the profits from the winery went into supporting the schools.

I remember when I was teaching high school, I was coaching basketball and baseball, driving the bus, and I was really enjoying working with kids.

III CHRISTIAN BROTHERS WINERY, 1964-1972

Joining the Winery

Meyer: After the first year, the head Brother, who was called a provincial, came to me and said, "We'd like you to go to Mont La Salle to learn the wine business and take over from Brother Timothy."

Hicke: Okay, just a second--let's back up again. Where did you go to teach?

Meyer: Oh, I taught at Christian Brothers High school in Sacramento for two and a half years. Since the first year I was there started in February and ended in June, I was only there a few months, when he came and said, "We'd like you to do this."

So I said, "Are you telling me under my vow of obedience that you want me to do this or are you asking me if I'd like to do this?"

He said, "Well, since this is so different from what you joined the group to do, we're asking you."

I said, "Well, the answer is no, then," and so he left me in the school.

But the next June at the end of the school year he came back again and said, "We'd like you to go take over from Brother Timothy."

And I said no.

Hicke: What was the theory behind this? Why did they want you?

Meyer: Well, I don't know. I had no background in wine. I didn't enjoy drinking wine. I could drink a glass of very simple Chablis, but to me, I'd prefer to drink a beer.

Hicke: That makes it even more curious.

Meyer: I guess they must have seen some management potential in me.

Hicke: I see.

Meyer: I jokingly tell people maybe they chose me because I could drink more than all the other brothers. I don't know, but I'm sure that wasn't it. I think they just saw some potential.

Hicke: Maybe they needed somebody in the business administration?

Meyer: Yes. This went on for two and a half years. He approached me three times--at the end of each school year. Finally the third year, I said, "Look, are we going to do this for the next thirty years? If you really want me to go up there, I'll agree under this proviso: that if I don't like it and ask out, you get me out because I want to go back to teaching." And he said okay. So I went back--

Hicke: I don't have any dates down here. You went back to Davis, then?

Management Training

Meyer: In 1964 I went to Mont La Salle to the winery. They asked me as soon as I got there, "Look, we have never had a Christian Brother who's gotten a degree in winemaking. Brother Tim majored in chemistry and had to learn all his winemaking on the job. We'd like you to go back to Davis next year and get a degree up there, and in the meantime, the first year we want to put you through every conceivable job in the winery from driving a tractor to running lab analyses, to making brandy to making sparkling wine, to learn all you can to get a good background, and then go back to Davis."

Hicke: Sounds like a program of management training.

Meyer: Yes, yes. I became a little better student at St. Mary's. I got interested. I was pretty much a B honor roll student there. And I wasn't quite so opposed to school, although if you ever gave me my choice between whether I'd like to be outside or whether I'd

like to be inside studying, there'd be no question what I'd choose.

Hicke: [laughs] And you can look outside the window and see why today! It's so beautiful. Tell me about your experiences the first year at the winery.

Meyer: Well, like I say, they just kept shifting me around for a week or two in each department and have the head of the department teach me how to make champagne or how to make brandy or how to make port or how to drive a tractor or how to run a vineyard. I just did everything conceivable.

Hicke: Did you work under Brother Timothy?

Meyer: Well, yes, he was in production. There were a couple other Brothers in administration--I worked with them, too.

Hicke: And they were--do you recall their names?

Meyer: Brother Gregory was the president of the winery, and Brother Norbert was his assistant.

Hicke: Thank you.

UC Davis Department of Viticulture and Enology

Meyer: Then after a year, I went back to Davis. In order to get a bachelor of science in winemaking or grape-growing, the first year was all labs. I didn't have to take any sciences for econ., so I was in biology, botany, nematology. I had five labs a week for the first year.

Hicke: Chemistry?

Meyer: And chemistry. All with these freshmen--seventeen, eighteen years old, and I was--let's see, I'd been through college and taught for three years, so I was about twenty-four. Of course at UC they're all smart as a whip, so I had to bear down. I got through that first year, and then the second year was really a breeze. All I was required to do is take thirty units of major subjects, so I took almost--I think I took all but one course that was offered in grape-growing and winemaking and got a 4.0 that year.

Hicke: Terrific.

Meyer: It was the other years that were the trouble. [laughs]

Hicke: Whom did you study with then?

Meyer: Under?

Hicke: Enology, yes. Under.

Meyer: Well, probably the big name was [Maynard] Amerine. I stayed on one year and got a master's in viticulture and Professor [Harold] Olmo, was my major professor, under whom I did my thesis.

Hicke: What was your thesis on?

Meyer: It was on mechanical harvest of grapes--that was the new thing in those days--and what effect it had on the quality of the wine. I harvested and made wine out of about thirty different varieties. I had to make a control and a mechanically harvested lot of every one of them. Then we had a tasting panel and ran an analysis on all of them to see if there were any significant differences. And then we had a tasting panel that tasted them for which one they thought was better.

Hicke: And what did you conclude?

Meyer: Well, we concluded that the method we had come up with in those days, which is no longer necessary, seemed to make better wine, but it was more expensive.

Hicke: The hand-picking, you mean?

Meyer: No, no, the machine.

Hicke: Was better?

Meyer: The way Olmo and one of the engineering professors came up with the idea of mechanical harvest is the canes are trained out on the wires, the trellis system, and they hit the wire with a baseball bat and the grapes rained off. They discovered if they cut the canes a week ahead of time and then hit the wire, they rained off easier and certain ingredients--the sugar was higher, the total acidity was higher and the pH was lower, and in general made better wine. But you had to go through and cut the canes on them. You know, for the amount of acreage--now they've got machines that will pick them without doing that.

Hicke: Well, if it rained in between the time they cut the canes and they came around to pick--

Meyer: If it rains at harvest anytime, you're in deep do-do. [laughter]
It's not what you hope for.

Hicke: But I would think if the canes are cut, it would be even more serious, but maybe that had no effect.

Meyer: I don't know. As it turned out, I wrote my thesis and got my master's and got out of there and we never used that procedure. I had some pretty impressive names when I went there. Dr. [James A.] Cook, [Dinsmore] Webb, Curtis Alley, Lloyd Lider, Vernon Singleton, Ralph Kunkfe, and Hod Berg.

Hicke: A.J. Winkler, was he there?

Meyer: Winkler had just retired. He was still around the department as emeritus. He had an office, but I never had him for a professor. Singleton. Alley. Well, I think that Olmo in viticulture and Amerine in enology were the two big international names at that time.

Hicke: Can you recall anything particular that you got out of those two professors?

Meyer: Well, I lived with Olmo and his wife for two years.

Hicke: Oh, you did?

Meyer: Yes. I probably learned more viticulture at the dinner table than I did in class. I mean I thought he knew grapevines on a first name basis. Why, I thought he was the greatest viticulturist in the world. Amerine was a little lofty. He wasn't very friendly with his students and we didn't like him very much, although he knew a lot. But you couldn't get very close to him.

Hicke: It came down from on high, what you learned from him.

Meyer: Yes. He was very involved in university politics. He used to go down to Berkeley every week, practically, for meetings. I got to like him better when I got out of college. I got out of college and was no longer a student. We were more on an equal basis. But he always walked around with his head up and would say, "How are you today, young man?" as if he had only had you in college for three years and he didn't know your name yet.

Hicke: Getting back to Singleton, can you recall specifically anything that he drilled into you or theorized about?

Meyer: Well, you know, he was a chemist and he was with Dole Pineapple before he came to UC. I received an award this summer from the

enology group--what they call their merit award--and I told the story of how the only B I got in viticulture or enology was in my graduate year I took a phenolics class, which was the first time Singleton ever taught it. That was his specialty, phenolics or tannins and coloring matter and so on.

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Meyer: He would put a very complicated organic formula on the board with all these double bonds and carbon atoms, and he would say, "You can tell by the double bonds on the fifth carbon atom that this is a very odiferous compound." [laughter] I'd look at it and say, "Who the hell can tell that? I can't!"

I don't think I ever knew what was going on in that class, as did most of the students. But we've become very good friends since and he was always friendly in school. Not like Amerine. In fact, my boy went to Davis one summer when he was in grammar or high school. They had a gifted-children's program up there, and he attended for I don't know how many weeks in the summer, and he lived with the Singletons while he did that.

Hicke: How interesting!

Meyer: So we got a lot closer to them through that. Alley was a lot of fun. He was kind of a piker. We used to go down to Reedley, and they had what they called Kearny Experimental Station, and Olmo and Alley would go down there to work on the vines for a couple of days. And Alley knew where every bargain was on Highway 99! You know, "Go here. They have breakfast for a \$1.99. Go in here. They sell a dozen eggs for one dollar." We were stopping at all these places because Alley had it all figured out. I enjoyed him.

Hicke: And Webb?

Meyer: Webb. Webb was also a chemist who you hardly understood half the time. He was very much into sherry. That was one of his specialties, and he had sherry aging for years and years. He was always a very nice man--kind of quiet, but a nice fellow.

Hicke: What did you take from him?

Meyer: I don't remember now what it was. It would have been an enology class. [interruption] We had three different professors in one winemaking course, and they all taught a third of it. One was Amerine and he taught wine analysis; one taught winemaking, I think that was Webb; and Singleton probably taught wine chemistry.

I enjoyed my days a lot at Davis. I stayed there, as I say, two years and got my second bachelor's, and then Olmo encouraged me to get my master's. I never considered myself much of a student, but at least I did enjoy it. I said to Olmo, "Look, I don't think they'll want me to stay here an extra two years, and I certainly know I don't." He said, "Well, I've got an experiment all organized and you could take it over and do the whole thing in a year." And so I did--I think it was thirty units and did an experiment and wrote a thesis and got an ulcer in one year.
[laughs]

Hicke: That was on mechanical harvesting.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: Was it brought on by stress, do you think?

Meyer: I think so, yes. And in those days I used to smoke cigars and drink brandy, and the more stressed I got, the more cigars and brandy I did, which were probably the exact wrong thing for it. I know now I just stay away from it, because those two things and Mexican food will just light me up.

Hicke: [laughs]

Meyer: My stomach's been pretty strong for twenty-five years, but those three things will bring the Mylanta right on. I have a duodenal ulcer.

Hicke: Well, are you getting a little more interested in winemaking by this time?

Meyer: Well, I was. In fact, when I went back to the winery and worked there--and as I say, I was a Christian Brother for fifteen years, but in 1972--I guess the Church had changed quite a bit with Vatican II, and probably I had changed. I just decided I couldn't live that life any more.

I enjoyed the winemaking so much I didn't want to go back to teaching, either, so I told them I was going to leave the order, but I would stay and work for them because they had taught me everything I knew about it. And it was really their decision. They were a little hung up on that, how I could be Brother Justin one day and Justin Meyer the next day. They had started moving me into public relations and things like that, so after a long process they finally said it's better if we just make a clean break. So I left there in 1972 and that's when I went on my own.

I don't get it so much anymore, but you can imagine that for the first ten years, and still to some extent now, people just don't meet too many people who left the monastery, and so if I was talking to a wine writer or somebody, they really want the "I leapt over the wall" story: "Why did you really leave? Because you fell in love with your wife or what?"

I say, "Look, just a bunch of things. It was time to leave. I was not happy, and I figured I could be happier outside." I didn't want to go through life frustrated, so I just packed up and left. It was their decision, not mine, that I should go somewhere else. I met my present partner, and we started Silver Oak out of an old dairy barn backyard.

Assistant Cellarmaster

Hicke: Stop! [laughs] You just went by twelve or fifteen years in one sentence! What did they put you to work doing when you got back to the winery from Davis?

Meyer: Well, they immediately gave me the title of assistant cellarmaster, which meant I was Brother Timothy's successor-to-be. My prime duty was I was in charge of all the vineyards. We had about 1,000 acres in Napa Valley and another 1,000 down near Reedley, as I recall, so I used to commute some, and work at both locations. And on the side I was tasting with Brother Timothy and John Hoffman, and Buck Bailey, the people who actually made the wine.

In the meantime, this Brother Norbert, who was the assistant to the president, quit the Brothers while I was at Davis, and they decided without telling me that their aim for me was really greater than just being a winemaker. They wanted me to run the whole show.

I was started in the production end of it. I was the manager of all the vineyards and had terrific headaches with Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers Union.

Negotiating with Cesar Chavez

Hicke: Okay, well, let's stop and elaborate on some of this. Since you just went by Cesar Chavez, tell me about that problem.

Meyer: Well, they were trying to organize the farm workers, and the farm workers really didn't want to pay dues to have a job. They went after us first for two reasons: we were a religious group, so we were easy pickings. If we didn't get along with them, we got a call from the Bishop who said, "It doesn't look like we're for social justice. Why didn't you go do that? Whether it's right or wrong." We were also the highest wage payers and had the best living conditions. We had a farm labor camp, and I think their logic was, if they got the best first, the others would be easy.

They were probably the most unscrupulous group I've ever dealt with in business. It was just a matter of whatever we'd get, they said we got coming to us. "You robbed us for so long as a class, so if we cheat or steal or break promises or anything, it doesn't matter. This contract is for you to keep, not for us."

For instance, every season on the first day of harvest they would go on strike, even though they had a contract. We would go to the farm labor camp and say, "Look, the contract says you have to go to work." And they said, "We're not going to work until you raise our per-hour or whatever." So we'd go and call the union hall saying, "All of your workers are on an illegal strike. We want you to get them to go back to work." They'd call us back and say, "We talked to them, but we can't do anything with them." We'd say, "Well, then are you saying this is a wildcat strike that you have nothing to do with?"

"Yes, that's right."

So we'd go in there and say, "Okay, fellas, you're all fired, and we're going to ask the union instead for sixty new men who will do what they're supposed to do."

Then the union would call and say it was a lockout.

So there were always those kind of things going on, and it just was a very unpleasant experience.

Hicke: Did you negotiate face to face?

Meyer: Yes. I used to sit across the table from a woman named Dolores Huerta, who is probably the most unscrupulous person I've ever done business with. I never did meet Cesar Chavez. He kind of kept aloof so he could have that saintly image and parade and fast. That was a very bad chapter for me.

I remember one time--you know, I'd get my instructions from the boss, and he said, "Take a hard line on this. Don't give any ground." So I go there and do that, and I get back and the bishop

calls up and says, "You've got to do this." He says, "Okay, go and give them what they want."

I said, "Look, if I have to, I'm never attending another meeting. Either you're backing me, or you're not backing me, but I'm not going to get in there and get the rug pulled out from under me."

Hicke: Oh! That's worth another bottle of Mylanta! [laughter] That's terrible. So how did that turn out?

Meyer: In my economic theory classes, I studied a lot of Catholic social doctrine, and I really believe it. I think the unions are supposed to represent that every man is entitled to a fair living, but I don't think they always act that way. In fact, I remember my teacher telling me, they asked one of the big union leaders, "Well, just exactly what do you want?" He said, "More." So no matter what you gave them, it wasn't enough, because they were oppressed and you were the rich guy and you owed them. We're non-union here, and I've paid my people top wages and top benefits, so they could never be tempted to join.

I figure, if you're the boss, you ought to be able to run your business, but when I was a young Brother, there was a big dispute that year that I did all the jobs in the winery. The union didn't want me to do those, because they said, "You can't drag a hose, you're management," so they had to negotiate: "Look, this guy's just in training to learn how to do that." And the average worker didn't care. Once I got in there, and they agreed to that, it was okay. But they thought maybe I'm trying to take away a job. "I don't want his stinking job. What are you talking about?" You know, "I just want to learn how you filter a wine. I don't want to be a wine filterer."

Hicke: How did this all sort out?

Meyer: Well, Christian Brothers went out of business. [laughs] They no longer own any wineries.

Hicke: Before you were--

Meyer: No, they were still union in the winery. They had the AFL-CIO Winery and Distillery Workers Union, and in the field they had United Farm Workers union. And I wouldn't say they're the reason for going out of business, but they certainly made running a business more difficult, as far as I was concerned.

Hicke: Well, you were in the negotiations with Chavez and Huerta. What happened? Just every year it was a major problem?

Meyer: Yes. We had to renew the contract every year.

Hicke: Did it ever settle down?

Meyer: Never settled down, even after you signed the contract, and you thought you had an agreement. First day of harvest, they would be out on an illegal strike.

Vineyard Management

Hicke: Now let me switch over to talk about managing the vineyards, but first can you tell me what kind of grapes you were growing?

Meyer: Oh, you name it.

Hicke: Okay. [laughs]

Meyer: That's probably one reason when I started Silver Oak, I concentrated only on Cabernet Sauvignon. We probably made thirty-five different wines at Christian Brothers--everything from burgundy and chablis through varietals, through rosés, sparkling wine, vermouth, sherry, port, brandy--and I was just sick of doing everything. Couldn't do them all. Only one could be your best, and I decided here that Cabernet was the best thing done in Napa and Sonoma counties, and I bet the whole farm on it.

Hicke: Yes, that makes a lot of sense. Did this continue all the time you were there, that they continued all these different kinds of varietals?

Meyer: Yes. If anything, they added more, rather than subtracted. We had a national marketing company named Fromm & Sichel. They were part owned by Seagram's. They would pretty much suggest what you should be making: If this was popular for Paul Masson, we ought to have one. And if this was popular for Louis Martini, we had to have one.

Hicke: Okay, you've got to keep up with the Germans?

Meyer: Yes, it was that kind of a shotgun approach to marketing, that if you made thirty-five different things, then you could find something you liked in there.

Hicke: Were you growing all your own grapes, or did you buy some grapes?

- Meyer: No, we were quite large, and I was also a grape buyer in Napa and Sonoma counties, so we had a grape buyer or several of them down around Fresno where we made the dessert wine and brandy. I learned from Brother Timothy how to deal with any growers, and I was mostly the one who would buy the extra grapes that we needed. We'd have a production goal every year of this many tons of this and this many tons of that. If you didn't have them in your own vineyards, you'd go out and try to find them and buy them.
- Hicke: Was this on a yearly sort of contract?
- Meyer: Mostly it was, although, when they heard I was going to leave, they asked--one of the final things that I did was go out and sign multi-year contracts with many of these key growers.
- Hicke: Because they knew you.
- Meyer: They knew me and it wouldn't be a big shake-up or hassle.
- Hicke: Did that work out?
- Meyer: Well, it did. I didn't have any trouble getting them signed up. But Christian Brothers' business began to fail after that, and so then they needed less and less grapes. Finally they decided they could do better selling the winery and investing the money, say, in the stock market, and then supplement their school incomes that way better than running the winery because it wasn't making the money they wanted it to make.
- Hicke: What year did they actually sell it? It's been--it's in the record someplace.
- Meyer: Probably the late eighties.
- Hicke: But it was a long time after you left.²
- Meyer: Yes, I left in '72.
- Hicke: Okay. Did you have a vineyardist on each vineyard, at each location, or did you oversee all of that?
- Meyer: Well, there were two of us up north here who looked after our own vineyards and the growers, but we didn't do the work. We would go in there and say, "This vineyard needs to be pruned this way," and there was generally a foreman in charge of each location. We

² The winery was sold to Heublein in 1987.

would show him what to do viticulturally, and then he would come out there with the men and do it.

Hicke: You would tell him how to prune and how to trellis and how to plant?

Meyer: Yes. What viticulture practice to do when.

Hicke: Did you plant any vineyards?

Meyer: Oh, yes. My last year or two there we planted most of that 1,000 acres up here, up north. Ironically, then I left there and I planted another 1,000 for my partner and me. In about three years I must have planted 2,000 acres up here.

Hicke: How did you decide what to plant? I'm still talking about Christian Brothers, when you planted a new vineyard.

Meyer: Well, your first criteria is take into account the soil and the climate and what grape variety and rootstock will do that well here. But then if there was no demand for that--like Riesling, why plant a bunch of Riesling even though it would do well, if you couldn't sell the wine? So the next thing would be, what wines do you need? Even if this wasn't the exact best location for them, you need it, so if no independent growers are growing it, maybe you've got to plant it. So there were a whole lot of criteria involved in how you chose the plant.

Hicke: And did you make those decisions?

Meyer: Well, there were several of us that would get together and hash this out. I can't say that I made all the decisions.

Hicke: Yes. How about rootstocks, did you choose those?

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: And if so, how?

Meyer: Yes, but in those days things were much simpler. There weren't as many rootstocks, and experimentation up at Davis had shown that AXR-1 probably produced the most crop and the most quality, so 75 percent of Napa and Sonoma counties were planted to AXR-1. Then it became phylloxera susceptible, and that's been the big problem the last couple of years. Then there was another rootstock for the hillsides and rocky or rough soils called St. George. So in those days, those were about two choices. If you had tough soil, you wanted to plant St. George, which is very vigorous, and if you had pretty good soil, you planted the AXR-1.

Hicke: And that was mostly on the recommendations of Davis and maybe Fresno?

Meyer: Yes. Primarily Davis.

Hicke: How about the county extension service, did they come into this?

Meyer: Well, they would work with you if you called them in and asked their advice. They were supposed to be the liaison between the research community and the grower community. Didn't always work that way, but we had a pretty good farm advisor--Jim Lider. His brother Lloyd Lider also taught viticulture at Davis, and he was a county farm advisor, and he worked very closely with his growers. But he left to start his own nursery business. So it kind of depends on the area you were in and who was the farm advisor.

Hicke: Where did you get the grapevines?

Meyer: Primarily from nurseries.

Hicke: Bench-grafted?

Meyer: As I recall, we had our own nursery for rootstock. And so we would go in in the wintertime of the year and make the cuttings when it was dormant and heal them, get them to root, and then plant them out. We mostly budded in the fields right onto those. Nowadays I don't do that anymore, because we don't have a lot of trained budders and grafters, so we deal with nurseries who give you green grafts. The Cabernet, say, they've already put on the rootstock, and you just plant the whole thing, but you need drip irrigation right away to take care of it. We didn't know about drip irrigation in those days.

Hicke: I was going to ask you--what about water?

Meyer: Well, sprinklers were just discovered for sprinkling and frost protection while I was with the Christian Brothers. But as I recall, drip irrigation hadn't been thought of until late seventies or after I was gone from there. You either dry farmed, or you irrigated, and if you irrigated, it was with sprinklers.

Hicke: So did you install sprinklers?

Meyer: Where we could. But it takes a tremendous amount of water.

Hicke: I'm sure.

Meyer: Many places on the west side of this Valley have no good wells, and so consequently over here you saw a lot of sprinklers and over

there you didn't. That's why you see a lot of reservoirs around, because the wells aren't big enough to directly supply the amount of acres. They feed water into the reservoir, and it's full, and then when you need to turn on the sprinklers, you turn on the well to replenish. And maybe you're using up the water three times faster than you're putting it in, so after about three nights in a row of frost protecting, you might be out of water in the reservoir.

Hicke: But you use the sprinklers only for frost protection now, is that right?

Meyer: Primarily yes. Now, in a typical vineyard today, we have both sprinklers and drip. We use the drip for irrigation so the water, number one, doesn't cover the whole area and grow a lot of weeds--which is useless--and number two, it doesn't come on the fruit and rot it, which the sprinklers do. So the sprinklers are used primarily in the spring of the year for sprinkler frost protection, and then the drips are for irrigation.

Hicke: We're still at Christian Brothers now. What kind of trellising did you use?

Meyer: We had all kinds of trellising. Probably Rollin Wilkinson and I, who were the viticulturists at Christian Brothers in those days, we were pretty much up to speed on trellising. He went to Davis, also--ahead of me--and when I first got into the business, they were primarily using what they call head-pruned vines. You'd see beautiful, old, head-pruned vines with reds and yellows in the fall. That was leaf-roll virus. To a viticulturist, you really don't want to see those colors. You want a vine that goes from green to maybe yellow, and doesn't have all these beautiful colors, because the beautiful colors generally signify a lethal virus.

Once the university got into what they call heat-treated or virus-free vines, we've gone for them, and they give better crop, better maturity, everything about them is better.

Hicke: Yes. While you were with Christian Brothers, did you ever go to Europe to study their Bordeaux or Burgundy wines?

Meyer: No, I didn't. I've gone there since on my own, but I never did as a Christian Brother.

Winemaking

Hicke: After the vineyard management, let's get into the winemaking, because you were doing that, too.

Meyer: Yes. One of the jobs they gave me, too, was I spent a considerable amount of time in the laboratory analyzing wines. I could do a total analysis of about twelve wines a day and then I'd taste them with the winemaker after we analyzed them, so we could look at the analysis. Sometimes it would say, "See, you're tasting the volatile acidity that's high in your analysis." I got to the stage where I could taste a wine and just about write an analysis within 10 percent of right or wrong.

Hicke: I was going to ask if that ever becomes possible.

Meyer: Probably the first twenty years at Silver Oak, we never did any laboratory work. It was just my palate. Then I felt that it was getting to the stage and the size where I couldn't keep on top of it that way, so we hired a quality control person to run some of these analyses so we wouldn't be on the wrong track or think we smelled something we didn't, that wasn't there. At Davis they taught you the technical part of winemaking. Out in the trade, working for somebody like Brother Timothy--tasting alongside of him--you learn the artistic part of the business. Many wineries that are technically correct are artistically a disaster.

Hicke: Can you elaborate on that a little bit? What's the difference between artistic and technical?

Meyer: Well, there aren't too many bad wines made any more, because of the degree of training at Fresno State and Davis, but there are some that aren't very pleasant to drink. I think that's the difference. They may be technically correct, but they just have no imagination on what wine should taste like and how to make it that way.

For instance, when I started Silver Oak, I wanted to make only Cabernet. My vision was that wine is food and it should taste good. And that's kind of a novel approach. There are many people who are making an artistic statement, and you don't want a second glass. We taste wines what we call blind. We brown bag them so we don't know which is which. You'll run across tasting wines and drinking wines. We do this about once a month for our employees, where we have a blind tasting of our wine against maybe six competitors. They know what they are, so they're not completely in the dark, but they don't know what A-B-C-D-E-F-G are, and they're trying to guess, well, which one is a Silver Oak and which

one is this and this. In the old days, especially, we used to find before they got very sophisticated palates that they may like a wine because it was powerful. Maybe the aroma's very strong--bell peppery or vegetative--and it really got their attention and they thought they might like this and rate it very high. But then I always used to say, "Okay. Leave the open bottles on the bar so people can go back and get a drink of what they like," and the first bottle empty is the real winner. I don't care what they voted on. They may vote on something that got their attention, but it's just like too much garlic, you don't go back to it. Too much curry: in small doses it's great, gives a little complexity. But too much of a good thing--it'll really get your attention at first and then you'll say, "I don't think I want any more of that," because it's just too much.

Hicke: Yes. Let me change the tape here.

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Hicke: So what kind of a wine was Brother Timothy looking for?

Meyer: At Christian Brothers we were kind of a mass producer. We didn't have vintage wines, because we felt continuity was more important than vintage or variation. Here we go where the vintage leads us. If we have a very ripe vintage, then you make that kind of wine. You do things that will bring that out. If you have a weak vintage, you may treat it differently. At Christian Brothers, we were always blending two or three years, so that every bottle of Christian Brothers claret you got pretty much tasted the same. If you liked that, you could come back to it and rest assured it would be like that, whereas a vintage producer may not be that way. So we tried to go for continuity.

I'd say that the wine-drinking public was not as sophisticated in those days. Up until the seventies, the industry was selling more burgundy and chablis than they were Cabernet and Pinot Noir. Now it's definitely a varietal business. And like I said, the competition's really steep. One thing that impresses me when I go to a tasting nowadays, where maybe there's a hundred wineries pouring their wine, I'll leave somebody behind the table to pour ours and I'll maybe go around and taste all the Cabernets that are for sale--there are a very few bad wines that have a noticeable production defect, so it just boils down to what you like better than the other.

We've been trying to make a wine that is aged longer than the competition's so it's smooth and mellow and enjoyable to drink when you open it. It will still age in the bottle, but if you

open it tonight--take it home from the liquor store and open it--it will still be good. That's always been our goal.

Whereas back in the seventies, a lot of wine writers were talking about this big, inky, tannic, monstrous Cabernet that will be great in twenty years. Well, it didn't take them long to find out that if you told them they couldn't enjoy your wine for twenty years, they didn't need another bottle for twenty years. If I go stick it in the cellar, maybe I'd never taste that brand. So we tried to produce a wine that's enjoyable the night you bought it and in the restaurant that night. I mean, it's pretty theoretical when you open a bottle at a restaurant, to talk about how great it's going to be in twenty years. It's either enjoyable tonight or you don't buy it again. I prolong the aging. We age the wines here a little longer than our competition, in the barrel, and then we age it longer usually in the bottle, also.

Marketing

Hicke: Going back to Christian Brothers again. Who were the major competitors? Or did you have different ones in different price niches?

Meyer: Well, that was one of the problems. Our national distributor, Fromm & Sichel, wanted to believe that we could compete in volume with Almaden and Paul Masson, and we could compete in quality with Louis Martini and Krug and Joe Heitz.

Hicke: All at the same time?

Meyer: You just couldn't do both. I mean, you wanted to spend some extra money and charge a higher price for well-aged wine, or you want a wine that's within everybody's reach but needs some polish. So I'd say our biggest competitors in those days--you know, when I started Silver Oak in 1972, there were about forty other wineries in Napa Valley. Now there are 300.

I remember Dr. Amerine in class at Davis, when he held up to us the great Cabernets that we should try to emulate and produce, it was Louis Martini, Charles Krug, Inglenook, and Beaulieu. Now you hardly read about them any more in competitive tastings. They're considered big and mediocre quality. The wine writers are interested in these little, 250-case-productions which you never heard of and can't find--\$75 a bottle. So one of the important parts of your marketing scheme is you have to pick out who you

want to compete against. Then your quality and your pricing and your packaging has to be competitive with them.

Hicke: So did you do that at Christian Brothers? Did you decide, or did the marketing people decide?

Meyer: Well, as I say, we had a problem with that because we weren't marketers, we were producers. Our marketers wanted something that would compete with everybody. We were the biggest brandy producers in the United States then. We liked to take pride that we could make a pretty good Cabernet, but I don't think the press ever considered us too strongly. We had some of the best vineyards in the Napa Valley, and my one regret--if I have a regret, which I don't have--I left the Christian Brothers in 1972 when I was thirty-three years of age with nothing. They gave me a dime for my first phone call. I truly believe they would still be in the wine business and very successful if I was still there.

Hicke: What did you finally end up doing? Did you try to compete on quality?

Meyer: We tried to make the best wine we could in huge volume, but it was very difficult. If we had one tank, for instance, that we thought was exceptionally good, we never bottled that by itself and called it private reserve, because we thought it would downgrade our regular Cabernet, so it would go in that blend and downgrade itself by going in with a lot of other Cabernets. We never decided if we were fish or fowl, [laughter] and I think that was part of their demise. They didn't have a clear marketing plan in their mind of what they wanted to be and who they wanted to compete with.

Equipment

Hicke: Yes. Tell me about the equipment--what kind of tanks and aging process.

Meyer: Well, the big equipment changes that I've seen over the years are, number one: stainless steel tanks for fermentation tanks, where you can control the temperature of the fermentation.

Hicke: Is that what you had at Christian Brothers?

Meyer: No, in those days, when I got there we had cement and redwood. Then we started moving into stainless steel. We were really pioneers in that in those days. So that was a big change. I

mean, if you saw cement fermenters and redwood today, you'd be shocked.

Hicke: Especially cement!

Meyer: Well, when I went to Bordeaux, one of the most famous, high-priced wines in the world is Chateau Petrus, and they had cement fermenters.

Hicke: Yes, I've seen those, actually.

Meyer: Stainless steel was a big change.

Hicke: Did you buy the tanks, then, while you were there? Were you involved in that?

Meyer: Oh, we started phasing them in. But I wasn't the decision-maker in the tank buying, so I learned from the process.

Hicke: What was aged in the cement? The reds?

Meyer: It wasn't so much aged.

Hicke: Oh, it was fermented.

Meyer: It was fermented. Just containers. They could have been anything.

Hicke: Okay.

Meyer: The other thing was that nobody hardly used any barrels in those days. There were larger tanks. We had big redwood tanks. We had 2,000 oak ovals. A fifty-gallon oak barrel wasn't heard of. I would have to attribute that to Robert Mondavi. He was the one that came from Europe and pronounced that the big difference in winemaking there from here is fifty-gallon barrels, sixty-gallon barrels. Since then, almost all the quality producers have gone to barrels.

So I would say stainless tanks and barrels are the two leading changes. There were changes in pressure of presses, those kinds of things, but not as radical.

Hicke: What kind of presses were you using up there at Christian Brothers?

Meyer: I don't know if I remember. I think they were made at Valley Founders in Fresno, but you can get them all over. For instance, down here at Silver Oak, we use French presses called Vaslin. Up

at our other winery in the Alexander Valley, we're using what they call Europress. They just happened to be there when we took it over and they perform well, so we kept them.

The big thing about presses is that you don't press too hard, or you get a lot of harsh tannin out of the skin, and so we tried to adjust the amount we press. And that determines the gallons per ton that you get. So maybe a bigger, low-priced, low-quality producer will squeeze the heck out of them and get 180 to 200 gallons a ton. We might get 160 to 180 gallons a ton, but there might be a noticeable difference in quality.

Hicke: What about bottling? Did you have an automatic bottler and corker and like that?

Meyer: Yes, I wasn't born in the Middle Ages. [laughter] It was done automatically, but again, just like here, we have a whole hodge-podge of equipment. We've never up 'til now gone out and said to somebody to supply us with a bottling line that's all the same. We've got an American bottle blower, we've got an Italian filler-corker, we've got a German foil-spinner, we've got a German labeler. Whatever we happened to think was the best on the marketplace, we might buy. And our setup might be different from the guys down the street.

There's an annual conference of winemakers--it was in Reno this year--and in the showroom is practically any equipment you'd ever want to buy for viticulture or enology, so you can see all these different kinds of presses and bottling lines and crushers and what have you, and you've just got to decide what's going to work best under your circumstances.

Hicke: At Christian Brothers, you probably just used whatever they had there already?

Meyer: Well, it was mostly there when I came.

Hicke: Yes. And did you make any significant changes when you were there?

Meyer: Not really. Most of my time there was spent in the vineyards and as associate in the winemaking, so I didn't make the decisions on the equipment for bottling and crushing and so on. Although I introduced small barrels there at the end when I was there, and we started experimenting with barrels. We just felt for the price we got for our wine we couldn't afford French oak barrels, so we were experimenting with American oak barrels. It turns out that all of our 5,000 barrels here at Silver Oak now are American.

Hicke: I believe you were way ahead of time on that one.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: In 1968 you were made director. That was an administrative position?

Meyer: Yes. Board of directors, but that was almost automatic because I was a Brother. Four of us Brothers and four or five businessmen from outside were on our board, so that wasn't--I guess it was an honor, but I didn't consider it a big deal because it was a slam dunk.

Hicke: What position were you occupying in the winery at that time?

Meyer: I was still assistant cellarmaster.

Hicke: Did you ever become cellarmaster?

Meyer: No, because I quit first.

Wine Consumers in the 1960s

Hicke: What was going on--I've got on the outline California wine history, but maybe you could just talk about what was going on up and down the Valley in the 1960s.

Meyer: Well, wine wasn't real popular, and I can remember in those days, we'd work all day, and at 3:30 we'd go home, take a shower, get our black suit on, and go somewhere in the Bay Area to do a wine tasting to make wine more popular. Wine was just coming into its own in those days. I'd say the average person didn't drink wine. We were trying to convince them it was good for them and tasted good. I think that's why now every charity in the state thinks you want to give them some wine free, because we used to give it away to popularize it, and we got ourselves into a bit of a box. Now everybody--

Hicke: You popularized it all right.

Meyer: You know, they never call the butcher asking for free steaks, but they expect the wine to be free.

Hicke: [laughs] That's an interesting point. You're right. That's how that idea probably came about. But I know it's true.

Meyer: It was a real educational process. Then I was traveling a lot throughout the country, when I wasn't making wine or running vineyards, and giving presentations to groups that our distributor had brought in, trying to make them more knowledgeable, or giving presentations to sales groups so they had the right answers. We were really working hard to get people to drink more wine.

Hicke: Out of your thirty or thirty-five wines, or whatever it was you were making, what kind of wines did you present for a tasting?

Meyer: Oh, it would depend on the location and what we thought they would like. We had a wine that was a Muscat called Chateau La Salle--it was a very sweet Muscat, had a terrific flowery nose. It was sweet and went down easy and it was extremely popular. A good wine drinker wouldn't drink an ounce of it. It's kind of like white zinfandel is today. Well, we sold the heck out of it, but it may go over better in Peoria, Illinois than it would in New York City. So you kind of chose the wines you would do for the presentation by where you were and what you felt was popular, and it was easy to see what the sales were for the area and get an idea of what they liked.

Hicke: So you definitely could see a regional difference in interest in wines?

Meyer: Oh, yes. I remember the first time going to the East Coast, I'd say they were much more aligned with Europe than they were with California. They had a little competition going on with California in New York, whether they liked it or not. You'd go in there and they'd say, "Well, gee, you're eight dollars a bottle. I can buy a good Bordeaux for eight dollars."

I'd say, "Give me a break, buddy. You can buy a Fifth Growth crummy Bordeaux that isn't worth putting in your mouth for eight dollars, but not a good Bordeaux of this quality."

I think that the French got their prices out of whack. On short years they'd just open the door for us to come in: people would buy more California wines as a viable alternative, and they just got to see that we did have as good a wine. I think now we can put our wines up against most French wines and do well in tastings. But their First Growths still have the reputation. I mean, when Pétrus can get \$250 a bottle, for instance, and Lafite-Rothschild and [Chateau] Margaux and so on, it tells you something. And they complain when the California wine is \$75.

So they have two categories to judge by. There's the French category and the California category, but I think we've made huge strides in the last twenty years.

Hicke: Now New York has its own wine business of sorts.

Meyer: Yes, but it's not terribly good. Quite frankly.

Hicke: How about the South? What was selling there?

Meyer: Beer.

Hicke: Oh, okay. [laughter]

Meyer: Yes, the South has some big markets, but they're in the Bible Belt and they had a lot of restrictive laws and still do. So some states do better than others. At Silver Oak, for instance, we do very, very well in Texas. It was just a natural. Silver Oak was a relatively scarce wine, and it's relatively high-priced, and it goes with steaks. And those are all the criteria you need in Texas, so it kind of caught on down there, whereas maybe some Chateau La Salle or port might not, or even a reasonably priced Cabernet of a reasonable quality. So it varies from state to state.

Hicke: Did you travel all throughout the United States for Christian Brothers?

Meyer: I started to. That was one of the reasons they had trouble keeping me there when I left, because I was beginning to be exposed as the great white hope for the Christian Brothers, and they didn't know how to deal with that. Even though a lot of Brothers who were teachers quit, they turned right around and taught at the same school the next year, so I thought it wouldn't be a big problem for them, but it was.

Brother Timothy

Hicke: Were you doing TV commercials?

Meyer: No, never got on TV. We were into newspaper in the biggest way, and it was mostly Brother Timothy. He was very well known as the cellarmaster of the Christian Brothers, and he was the image. I was the new university-trained and so on, so we never tried to steal any of his thunder while he was still active. But I was supposed to take over as he phased out, and I quit, so he had to come out of his retirement.

Hicke: Oh, did he?

Meyer: Well, he never really was retired, but he had to start putting in more time. I think he worked into his seventies, and he's about-- I would guess he's eighty-nine now. He's retired up at Mont La Salle, west of Napa. He gardens a lot. I take him wine periodically. Now that he doesn't have regular access to wine, I want to make sure he has some good wine to drink. Timothy is a real gem and I enjoy him very much.³

Hicke: Can you tell me any stories about him?

Meyer: Well, maybe two things. He was a corkscrew collector, so the four of us Brothers who worked at the winery, whenever we went on vacation somewhere, we knew we were going to spend a good amount of our time with Timothy in pawn shops looking for corkscrews. [laughter] That was just part of the deal. That was the price. The other one is that he hated salads, but he loves desserts, and there was this big routine we all knew by heart: every time the waitress came and said, "What kind of dressing would you like?"

"Well, I don't like green salad, but maybe you could bring me two desserts." [laughter]

Leaving Christian Brothers in 1972

Hicke: That's great! Anything more about Christian Brothers that we should go through?

Meyer: Well, two things maybe. As I said earlier, I think that's what makes my story very unique. There aren't too many ex-monks who are winemakers, so everybody wants to talk about that. And the other thing is that I never regret one day of the fifteen years I spent as a Brother. I think it made a deeper and better person out of me. Personally I like married life and my wife and kids-- after twenty-seven years I like them better than the fifteen years in the corps, but it was a great life. I don't know if you're Catholic or know about Vatican II, but Pope John really loosened up some things with Vatican II way back sometime in the sixties, and I guess I was a little too conservative, and I thought some people used that to cut corners.

³ Timothy, Brother, *The Christian Brothers as Winemakers*, an oral history interview conducted 1969 by Ruth Teiser, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1974.

I felt like my job as a Brother was to make several million dollars a year to support the schools, and I felt a little put upon that these guys were cutting corners maybe from what I thought it should be, and I was supporting the whole thing. I was a sucker in the group, and I think that's what kind of soured me about the whole thing. And when I felt like--you know, they're very strong on communal life, Christian Brothers. You did things together. And we were with some old retired Brothers up there living with them, so you'd come home after working your tail off all day and really have no companionship. I had a real tough German boss, Brother Gregory, who if you said, "I'd like to go out and play some golf on Sunday," he'd say, "Oh, you'd better stay here. Fromm & Sichel may send a retailer up," and that sort of thing.

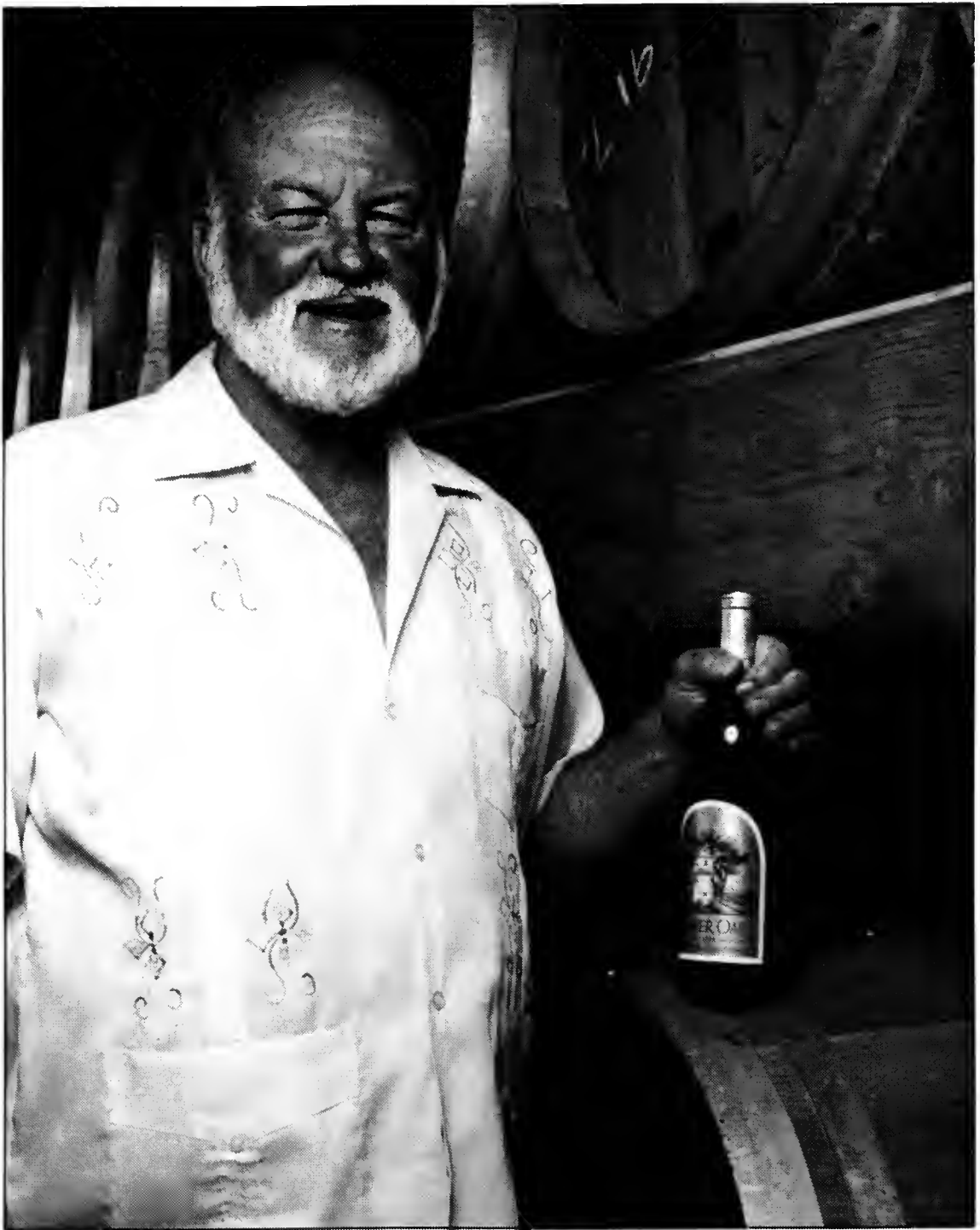
I finally said, "Look, I'm not a slave to this business. I love it and enjoy it, but I'm going to live my own life, and if you don't like it, that's tough on you." Finally I just said, "Hey, I'm not enjoying this and I don't want to turn bitter or anything, so better I just get out of here."

Hicke: Okay, and this was 1972?

Meyer: Yes.



Justin and Bonny Meyer, 1999.



Justin Meyer, 1999.

IV SILVER OAK CELLARS

Forming a Partnership with Ray Duncan

Hicke: Did you know right away what you were going to do?

Meyer: Well, yes, generally. I knew I wasn't going to work for a competitor. There were probably about five wineries who called me up and offered me a job--probably to pick my brain on how we did things. I didn't want to work for a competitor and I really enjoyed the business, so that's why I ended up--my partner and I with Silver Oak.

Hicke: Who is he?

Meyer: His name is Raymond Duncan from Denver. He's in the oil and gas exploration business, and he had bought about 500 acres of land in the Napa Valley that he fell in love with. He had come around to wineries saying, "Look, I think I just bought 500 acres of the last best plantable land in Napa Valley, but I don't know anything about it, so if you would take it over and plant it and manage it and take the grapes, we'll form some kind of a partnership." We [Christian Brothers] didn't want to do it because we were having so many headaches with Cesar Chavez.

Hicke: He came to you while you were at Christian Brothers?

Meyer: While I was in charge of Christian Brothers' vineyards.

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: He also went to four or five different other big wineries. Then six months later he heard that I had left the Christian Brothers, so he came back and said, "Look, I haven't made a deal with anybody yet. Why don't you and I do this together and we'll be partners and you get it planted?" I said, "Well, I'm interested in that, but I've seen this business go up and down so many times,

I think the way to not do that is to integrate a vineyard and a winery. So if you want to have a winery in your long-term plans, then I'm for being your partner, but if you want to be just a grower, I don't want any part of it." So we started Silver Oak out here out of a dairy milking barn that was on this property.

Hicke: This was the property that he had bought?

Meyer: This was one of them.

Hicke: Yes. How did you choose a name?

Meyer: We chose the name Silver Oak because we're halfway between Silverado Trail and Oakville.

Hicke: I never thought about that!

Meyer: We really wanted the name Silverado Cellars, but another winery at that time owned the rights to that name and they wouldn't sell it to us. We thought Silverado Country Club--Silverado Trail is well known, and when we couldn't get it, we needed a name for our first bottling and we came up with Silver Oak. People don't know if it's a silver oak barrel or a silver oak tree or what. It's none of those.

Hicke: It's a very distinctive name, though. I didn't have any idea about the relationship between the two places, but it's memorable name.

Meyer: Yes, it's worked out well.

Hicke: What month in 1972 did you start in?

Meyer: Well, I think it was January of '72 that I announced to the brothers I was going to leave. And between them deciding whether I could stay and getting vineyard contracts signed, I stayed there until June of '72. Then I left there and Ray and I became partners in July of '72. We started Silver Oak out of that dairy building in September of '72.

Hicke: Were these vineyards already planted?

Meyer: No, I planted them. All that was a dairy pasture, and it was where the cows for this dairy used to roam, so I took down all the barbed wire fences and put in the stakes and sprinklers.

Hicke: Is that what you started out doing, or did you actually make wine in '72?

Meyer: No, in '72, '73, '74 I was planting vineyards.

Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon

Meyer: I went back to Christian Brothers, to Brother Timothy. We had a little vineyard called Napa Gamay that they wanted the grapes from, so I said, "I'll tell you what. For 1972, I'll sell you the Gamay grapes if you will crush and ferment some little bit of Cabernet for us that we have in the Alexander Valley."

I tell people, "I wish I could say to you that I really studied the soils and the climates of the Alexander Valley and decided it makes a great Cabernet, but the honest truth is, the only twenty acres of Cabernet that was producing was there, so we made that wine." In a couple of years, I began to really like that soft, velvety style of the Alexander over the more tannic Napa Cabernets. And nobody had Alexander Valley on their label--it was either Napa County or Sonoma County--and we were one of the first to come out with the Alexander Valley Cabernet. For 1972, '73, and '74, we called it North Coast. It was a little deceptive. We didn't want people to know where our grapes came from because the winery was in Napa Valley. In '75 we liked it so well that we decided to put Alexander Valley on the label.

Hicke: Was it an appellation by then?

Meyer: Not then. It was some years later.

Hicke: So it's still the patch that's up there?

Meyer: No, we don't own that vineyard anymore. For the last twenty-five years we've upgraded and we don't own any of the vineyards we started with in the seventies. They're all totally different. In general, they are a little more up the hills and there's a little more structure to them. I think we made pretty good wines in the seventies, but I think the eighties were better, and I think the nineties were better than those. It has a lot to do with--I really think quality starts with the vineyard. That's why you can't make great wine in Fresno, because you can't grow great grapes. It's too hot.

Hicke: Yes, it's true. Well, so you actually did make a '72 Cabernet?

Meyer: That was our first vintage.

Hicke: That was Alexander Valley.

Meyer: Christian Brothers made it and fermented it. Then we brought it over here and put it in barrels and aged it in oak.

Cooperage

Hicke: What barrels?

Meyer: The '72 wasn't a big year, so I decided that new barrels would be a mistake. I had a friend named Dick Peterson, who was a winemaker at Beaulieu, and I bought some used barrels from him, and we put the '72 in the used American oak.

In those days I was trying some European oaks: Limousin, some Nevers, some Yugoslavian, some American for maybe the first six to ten years. I don't know when I made the change. Finally I decided that French oak was no better for our wine. I liked the American oak better--the aroma, the flavor. And it was about a third of the price, so why am I killing us? So we gradually phased out all our French oak and went exclusively to American. We built that up over the years. Now we have approximately 6,000 American oak barrels.

Hicke: Where do you get the oak barrels?

Meyer: Primarily in Missouri. We have a cooper back there that we like his quality. But we buy small amounts from six or seven other coopers and we put the same wine in. Then every six months we have a comparative tasting. And we still like this one cooper best.

Hicke: Can you give me that name?

Meyer: His name is A&K Cooperage in Northeast Missouri. We're presently negotiating to buy half of the place.

Hicke: What kind of toast do you require?

Meyer: Well, we call it medium toast, but that's another big problem. There is no standard for that, so when we buy from these six or seven--and there may be ten barrels from each guy compared to our regular one--we find wide variation in toastiness, even though we tell them all "medium." Then the second year, we have to go back to Demptos and say, "You're far too toasty. You've got to lighten up the toast if you want to continue to sell us barrels, or you're out of the running." And we'll go to this other guy and tell him --so we go to Demptos and Seguin Moreaux and Tonneliere Francais

and Mendocino Cooperage and Blue Grass Cooperage. We've dealt with all kinds of people over the years.

Rootstocks, Pests, and Diseases

Hicke: Getting back to your planting job, what did you choose for rootstocks?

Meyer: Well, most of our properties were AXR-1, because that was just the way to go in those days. We didn't know a whole lot about other ones. One vineyard in particular had a lot of clay and rocks in it, and I planted it to St. George. Then when the phylloxera thing came up, it has not been affected.

But now we have another disease called Eutypa. It's actually an apricot disease, and it will kill vines from the air, on the pruning wounds. If it rains, you get the spores on the pruning cut and it goes through the vine. It's also called Dead Arm Disease. So we had phylloxera and now we're going through a big year of Pierce's disease, and what is out there next. I'm the president of the American Vineyard Foundation, which is an organization that raises funds for research. This year we raised about two million dollars.

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Meyer: And you know, I've been telling these people, "Phylloxera is out of the barn. We've got to start looking at Pierce's disease and Eutypa so it doesn't broadside us next."

A lot of people who had to redevelop their vineyards because of phylloxera never got into full production. In six years they're dead again because of Pierce's disease.

Now it's a catastrophe down in Temecula, and the government's throwing money at our organization. They want to do a couple of million dollars research just on Pierce's disease. We were saying "Well, we don't know if we can come up with some quick results. You may have the money, but we can't give you the results next week." This Pierce's is a hundred years old, now, so we've got viticulturists and plant pathologists and botanists and entomologists, and we've set up a new method of research--maybe we'll get to that later.

Hicke: You might as well go ahead with it, since we're on the subject.

Meyer: Instead of asking the researchers to submit projects they want to do and we try to judge if they're worth doing or not, we went back about three years ago and we said, "The industry's top priority right now is Pierce's disease. We want a multi-talented, multi-disciplined team. We want to know how you would attack Pierce's disease." So we finally ended up, "We'll guarantee \$250,000 a year for five years in a row, but we want answers. We're not offering you job security." The best presentation we got was from a group--three of them from Davis, one from Berkeley, and one from Florida (because they had big Pierce's disease problems in Florida and Texas). So we're trying to bring in other researchers that have a whole different, fresh view and get these guys to work together. They don't like to work together, because they all have such big egos that when the paper is published, they want their name as the head researcher on it. We've finally been successful at doing this.

The government must think we're geniuses, because we got this thing organized a couple years ago. The State of California came back and voted in \$750,000 a year for each of the next three years, but the industry had to raise \$250,000. Well, we've already done it. We're funding this project for \$250,000 this year, so we'll take your \$750,000, thank you, and we really hope to get some results. We also have a project going on what's called slow and stuck fermentation--it's a big problem in winemaking. Lynda Bisson at UC Davis is heading up that team.

We're guaranteeing them five years to find the answer to this, and we're hopeful that if this approach works, in the future, our research will not be to ask the researchers, "What would you like to do?" and we'll judge on whether it's good or not; we'll say, "We want an answer to Eutypa, and we want five people that are multi-disciplined--plant pathologists and entomologists or whatever--and we want a solution. You've been crying for years that you can't be sure there's money enough--why you don't get answers. Well, we're guaranteeing \$250,000 a year, but we want answers. [pounds table] And we're going to have a committee that will monitor what you're doing about three times a year and make sure you're on the right path."

So we're very hopeful that it will work, but we were in place anyway when the politicians finally decided this is a big deal and started voting in money. The AVF was somebody who already had a proven track record. We'll manage it, we'll see that it's good science, we won't let anybody just spend your million dollars. We're saying to the researchers, "Look, we can get a million or two million dollars, can you spend that much money possibly when your projects were \$250,000? We don't want you to just go out and

buy chocolate sundaes or something, but we want you to really get us some results."

We're thinking we can step up this research by getting Florida and Texas and people like Stanford involved, because now we have some money to offer them, so we should be able to get interested some top researchers who are doing other things.

Hicke: That's really exciting.

Meyer: Yes, it is. We've been struggling. I didn't start the American Vineyard Foundation, but it was kind of in the deep freeze and when I started reorganizing it about the late 1980s--we've been going for about eight to ten years now--we struggled to get \$300,000 the first year from the industry, and we're up to \$2 million now, plus all this million and seven that's coming in for Pierce's Disease, itself. It will be in the three or four million dollar category.

Hicke: That is really impressive. I think you're doing good work there.

Vineyard Properties

Hicke: Let's go back and talk a little bit about the vineyards. Do you know why Mr. Duncan purchased these properties?

Meyer: He came out here to visit a friend, then just fell in love with the area. He often jokes, "Don't ever come in the Napa Valley in the springtime. You'd buy much more land than you ever expected to." I think he just fell in love with it, and he's been a good partner now for twenty-seven years.

Hicke: How did he pick out the actual property?

Meyer: I'd say pure availability. You know, in the oil business they have what they call "land men." You're going into North Dakota to drill some oil so you send this guy in advance to try to tie up leases with the land owners, so if you hit oil they get a royalty. He sent one of these land men out here and he said, "Get me about 500 acres in the Napa Valley." He didn't know what to look for. It was pretty off the wall.

Hicke: [laughs] Somebody did a good job--whether it was the land man, or--

Meyer: Yes, yes.

Hicke: And you told me how many acres. You had 500 developed, you said?

Meyer: Well, we had close to 1,000 in Napa, Lake, and Sonoma counties. We've since sold all that. We're in Napa and Alexander Valley now.

Hicke: You got out of the Lake County. And they're all planted with Cabernet, I take it?

Meyer: No, because when we owned Franciscan Winery, we made about seven different wines, so we planted about seven varietals, which were Chardonnay, Riesling, Chenin Blanc, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Cabernet, and Gamay.

Purchase of Franciscan Winery

Meyer: The main goal in 1972 was to make Silver Oak a very specialized Cabernet-only winery, where we'd try to make the best Cabernet we could. We were going to have another winery that would handle the rest of the 1,000 acres and make the typical five to twelve varieties. We thought we were going to build a winery on this big property that we owned next door, but it ended up that in 1975 Franciscan was in bankruptcy and there were a number of other wineries available, so we decided it would be cheaper and quicker to buy a winery than to build one.

So we bought Franciscan out of bankruptcy, and then all the grapes from the 1,000 acres started going there. We started Silver Oak in 1972. We bought Franciscan in 1975. Our plan was never to sell a bottle of Silver Oak until it's five years old, so it was 1977 until we sold a 1972. In the meantime we bought and started Franciscan, so many people, from just a marketing standpoint, think Franciscan was first and then Silver Oak was second, whereas it was the other way around. We just didn't age things as long at Franciscan.

Hicke: Did you have other partners when you went into Franciscan?

Meyer: No. Just the two of us.

Hicke: Who owned Franciscan? Who'd you buy it from?

Meyer: We bought it from the judge. Bankruptcy judge.

Hicke: Oh. Yes.

Meyer: But it was started in '72 by some doctors and lawyers from the Bay Area, and they went bankrupt in about a year to a year and a half, and then it was taken over by some Canadians. They went bankrupt in about a year to a year and a half.

It's kind of ironic. When I first got out of the Brothers in 1972, I rented a little, tiny house from a friend of mine who worked for Louis Martini. His name was Bernard Scota. I said, "Bernard, I really need someplace to live." He wasn't quite finished with his stuff, but I said, "Look, you've got to understand. I lived in a monastery for fifteen years, I'm not very picky about what my room looks like." So I was living in this little house, and Ray Duncan heard I'd left the Christian Brothers, so he came out and we're sitting in the front yard with a little hibachi barbecue and a couple of steaks for dinner. He points across the street, and they were building Franciscan winery up in Rutherford, and he says, "What's going on over there?" I just said off the top of my head, "Oh, a bunch of doctors and lawyers building a winery. They'll probably be bankrupt in a couple of years." And it was about three years to that day that we bought it out of bankruptcy.

Hicke: You are a prophet. Did you just kind of guess at that, or did you have some reason to think that might be the case?

Meyer: We knew we wanted a bigger winery to handle the grapes in, but as I said, our plan was to build one on this property. But when Franciscan and Souverain was for sale and Oakville Vineyards was needing some infusion of capital, we decided one of those three would be a better choice. We had run some economic models, and we felt that Franciscan fit it pretty well, so we bought it.

Hicke: Since we're on Franciscan, can we just carry that on through? What was going on there and what did you do?

Meyer: Well, like I say, it was in bankruptcy, and it had been closed for a few months. We went to a sale, a courthouse sale, and the guy ahead of us in line said, "Judge, I'll pay you this much money," which was less than we were prepared to pay. "I'll pay you this much, but I don't have cash, so I'll have to pay it in terms." And the judge said, "I accept the price, but I don't want terms. I want cash." And Ray looked at me, who of course was broke, and stepped up and said, "Your honor, we'll pay that much cash for it up front," so we bought it and went back to see what we had bought.

Hicke: Do you want to tell me how much you paid for it?

Meyer: You know, I don't remember now. It was a very complicated deal, because somebody owned the land, and a lady owned the building, and a bank--I don't even remember which bank now, First Security Bank, I think--they owned the inventory, the wine that was in the tanks, as their security. We bought the equipment. So then we went to the lady that owned the building and the land and said, "Mrs. Lytton, either you're going to have an empty building while we move out, or we're going to work out a lease deal with you and make this thing go. And it's to your benefit to try to make it work." So we put it together with her and the bank and it was very complicated.

Hicke: Yes, so what happened to the inventory?

Meyer: Well, I got the bank to agree that I would be in charge of inventory. I could make whatever blends I thought were good. They would pay for the bottling supplies and I could flush it down the drain if I didn't like it. They were only offered about 40¢ a gallon for the inventory. I said, "We can beat that. We can double that price for you, but you've got to work with us for six months or a year."

Hicke: It was in tanks, you said?

Meyer: It was in tanks and barrels. Some oak. They had about 30,000 bottles. A broker came to us and said, "I'll give you eight dollars a case for that wine, but I have to take it on consignment; I can't pay cash." I said to my partner, "I'm no brain surgeon, but a dollar a bottle is twelve dollars and he's offering us eight on consignment." So we ran the world's biggest dollar-a-bottle sale and sold about 30,000 bottles the first day. And I've still got people who love me and people who hate me for that to this day. [laughter] I just hated to watch 30,000 bottles getting carried out at a dollar a bottle, but we were faced with a very difficult situation.

We just said, "Come in and taste this stuff, because we don't want it back. If you like it, buy it for a dollar, if you don't like it--." We had restaurateurs coming in here with a truck and buying thirty cases of this to serve as their house wine.

Hicke: They had to come to the winery?

Meyer: Yes. And they had to taste the wine at a tasting. They didn't have to, but they couldn't bring it back, so you'd better taste it.

It was so successful that when we ran out of the 30,000 bottles, we bottled some more of the same label to sell for a

dollar a bottle, because we knew it would sell. In the meantime we started crushing and fermenting our own grapes there and came out with a whole new design package with our new pricing system for the better wines. These were pretty average wines at a very average price.

Hicke: This is Franciscan, now? We're talking about the Franciscan label? Okay, so the vineyards were planted and what did you have to do? I take it that you just took over the vineyards as well.

Meyer: No, they were our vineyards. They didn't have any vineyards. Remember we had planted 1,000 acres in '73, '74, and then we bought Franciscan in '75. We had vineyards planted, and we said, now we need a place to process these grapes. This place came up for sale at a bargain price, so we bought it.

Hicke: So you only got the equipment and leased the winery, and there were no vineyards.

Meyer: We only had that Franciscan vineyards from '75 to '79, when a West German company came along and wanted it. You might say they offered a price we couldn't refuse, so we sold Franciscan, along with 500 acres of land in Napa and Sonoma counties and came back down here and regrouped. I stayed on there--we sold in '79, I stayed on in '80 and '81 as president and winemaker, at which time I couldn't take the Germans any more and I resigned. Then I came over here and we built this place.

Hicke: Anything else we should cover on Franciscan? We went through all that pretty fast.

Meyer: Franciscan was a great learning experience, but it took a toll. It was hard work. I was young and we were raising kids then. We have three kids who are now twenty-four, twenty-two, and eighteen, so here they are little toddlers, and I was working long hours. I would fall asleep at the dinner table, I'd be so tired. I'd just sit there and nod off. We took it from zero distribution when we took it over to when we sold it in four years, we were in fifty states selling 70,000 cases of wine. So when I wasn't making wine, I was traveling to sell it.

Hicke: So you spent most of your time on Franciscan?

Meyer: It was a school of hard knocks. Yes, because we didn't start selling Silver Oak until '77.

Bonny Meyer

Meyer: My wife was the sales manager for Silver Oak then. She was the only employee. She had two little boys, and when she finally had the girl, she said, "I quit. I don't want this job any more. I don't want to travel." But I'd say in 1977, '78, '79, she sold all the Silver Oak we made. I just made it on the side and then ran Franciscan. I tell people I ran Franciscan to support my Silver Oak habit.

Hicke: Yes. Tell me about your wife. What's her name?

Meyer: Her name--we call her Bonny. Her name is Barbara, but she goes by Bonny. She's a Davis graduate.

Hicke: What was her maiden name?

Meyer: Smith.

Hicke: She was a Davis graduate?

Meyer: She went to Davis, and she was a psychology major and then got a teaching credential. After about six months of teaching, she decided she didn't want to babysit anymore, and she hasn't taught since. I met her because she worked in the lab of my professor Olmo, who was my major professor. She was flunking Spanish at the time at Davis, and having been a Spanish teacher, I brought her up to a B. [laughs] We knew each other for about five years, and then when I left the Brothers, I looked her up again, and we got married later on.

Hicke: Tell me about your children--their names and approximate ages.

Meyer: Chad is twenty-four now. He was born in 1975. He attended a Catholic high school here in Napa, and then he attended Boston College. Got a degree in business, and he now has his own webmaking business.

Hicke: Out here?

Meyer: Out here. He's trying to concentrate on wineries, because he knows a certain amount of that.

My second boy Matthew is twenty-two years old, and he just graduated from Lewis and Clark College in Portland in biology, and his plan is to go to Davis next September and get a master's in winemaking. He's working at an Oregon winery this crush.

Our daughter, Holly, is eighteen and she just started UOP [University of the Pacific] in September. She's a graphic arts major there.

Hicke: You're going to get some help, sounds like, pretty soon.

Meyer: It sounds like Matthew's going to get into the business, but the other two have not shown any interest in particular.

Hicke: Well, graphic arts might be of some help, and so would a webmaster.

Meyer: Yes, you're right. In fact, Chad has made our webpage for Silver Oak and for another business we have called Meyer Family Port; we gave him one of his early jobs to support him until he got started. Bonny, my wife, has produced all of our labeling and packaging and press kits and things, and I think even though Holly hasn't said so, that had a great influence on her picking graphic arts because her mother did all that stuff. She's not a graphic artist, but she has very good taste.

Hicke: Yes, and talent.

Meyer: She either worked alone or with a graphic artist on different projects and came up with everything we have.

Hicke: So she designed the label, also?

Meyer: Yes. And I think you probably received her press kit?

Hicke: I did. It's excellent. Yes.

Meyer: She designed that.

Hicke: It's a beautiful press kit. Very nice.

Meyer: Yes. When she quit being sales manager, she started working on marketing, so she could do it when she wanted to. And she just resigned about a year or two ago as marketing director, and she now marketing consults. We have a marketing person, and they kind of have to pass everything by her to get her approval before we make 5,000 copies of something.

Hicke: She's really been involved in the whole enterprise, sounds like.

Meyer: Yes. And that's good and bad. I was the one who finally urged her to quit two years ago, because I said, "I love my business, but I don't want to come home and talk about it at the dinner table. You know too much about it, and you always want to talk

about it." You know, she would bring it up in those years, and finally I said, "I'll be in my office at nine o'clock tomorrow morning if you want to talk business, but I don't want to talk about it right now." I finally convinced her that, "I think we'd be happier if we didn't talk so much wine and business." It's worked really well. We don't do it much any more, and now she's not involved in it day-to-day.

Hicke: Did she get involved in Franciscan at all?

Meyer: Yes. I don't recall that she got so involved in the label process, but she was involved with some redecoration. She's in charge of that around here--anything we do in terms of that--that trellising system for a walkway or pictures that we put in, or anything like that. Up at the other winery, it has three apartments, and she redecorated them and furnished them. They were empty. She still does some of that, but we're not talking anymore about a deadline she has to meet next Tuesday for some reprint materiel, and, "I can't get this guy off the dime." "Look, I don't want to talk about it."

Demand for Wine

Hicke: Who was the marketing person for Franciscan?

Meyer: We were not that sophisticated. I think we made our own marketing plan. The whole bunch of us sat down and came up with a plan.

Hicke: What kind of goals did you have for the winemaking there?

Meyer: Our motto, which I decided was not a good one, was "Premium wines at affordable prices." I don't think people think that affordable prices are on premium wine. So you had a kind of controversy there, but that's what we were trying to do, was make the best wine we knew how--because we had all our own vineyards--out of good grapes and not charge too much for it.

Hicke: Do you find that demand for wine is pretty inelastic? Almost as if the higher the level of the price, the better the wine is thought to be?

Meyer: I think there's a certain amount of that. But the other side of it is that so many times when you see that this wine is \$100 a bottle, there's only 250 cases of it. We make 50,000 cases of Cabernet. I don't even consider those people competition. I don't care what kind of press they get.

If every tasting club in the country bought one bottle to taste, it would be gone and then you'd read about it and you'd go down to look for it to taste it, and there's no more. So they're not really an economic entity. It's some guy who made some money in another business, and he's stuck in his own ego, usually. The less there is of it, the more excited the press gets about it. That's kind of an ego thing, too. That they want to be the first and the only ones to taste it and they tell you about it and you go look for it and it's no longer available.

Hicke: That's really not a very good service to the consumer.

Meyer: I don't think it is. They do it because they are the *cogniscenti* then. That might bring me somewhat to my book here.

Hicke: Oh, yes, I want to hear about that.

Plain Talk about Fine Wine

Meyer: The reason I wrote *Plain Talk about Fine Wine* is I think too much of the writing about wine has terrified people about wine, rather than make them feel more comfortable and want to try it. You know? They tell you what uppity wine you should like. If you don't like it, you think you're wrong because they know. Or they criticize your favorite wine. If you like white Zinfandel, go for it. It's not for somebody to tell you it's good or bad. I think it's a pretty poor reflection on American palates that white Zinfandel, which is sweet and cold--that's why people buy it--that it is the number one leading varietal wine in the United States right now.

Hicke: Is it?

Meyer: By far. I think that's a reflection on the American palate. But if that's what they want, give it to them. We're not trying to do that. We're trying to make a more classic wine. But who am I to tell you what you should like? Frequently we'll go out to dinner with a group of people--nobody ever passes me the menu and says, "Will you order our dinner?" But they always pass me the wine list saying, "Do you want to order the wine?" Well, how should I know what you're going to like? I may know something more about this wine than you do, and I may think I'm picking out the best wine on the list for the price. That doesn't mean you'll like it.

Hicke: Well, how do you go about finding a wine you like? I mean, you can't go into a grocery store and taste every one of the 500 varieties that they have.

Meyer: No, I think this is where wine reviewers provide a service. That if you find that Joe Blow generally has the same palate as you, if he says it's good, go try it, because you can't taste everything he tasted. He tasted a hundred Cabernets, and he recommends these ten, say. Well, if in the past what he recommended you've liked, you've got a good chance that you'll like one of those ten. But I wouldn't go out and buy five cases because he says it's good; I'd go out and buy a bottle and try it, and then if I like it, I buy it.

So what I tried to say in *Plain Talk*--I was teaching a course on wine appreciation at Napa College, probably about ten times. So the course was twelve three-hour lectures. I just finally said, "No book has ever told it the way I would tell it." Even Amerine and Singleton wrote a book on wine⁴ that I read when I took Vit3, I felt it devoted way too much time to foreign wines. I don't want to popularize foreign wines! What did they ever do for me, the French! [laughter] I wanted a book that was pretty Californian, and so I started out with how to grow good grapes, what you have to do, and how to make good wine, and how to taste and how to do this, so that the average consumer could pick it up and understand it and not be a bunch of mumbo jumbo to him.

One of the real gratifying things is over the years I've had a lot of people come to me and say, "You know, I read your book and I could understand it, and it's really helped me with wine." What it says--at the end of the page, the message is, "Your palate is correct for you, so if you like something that this reviewer doesn't like, forget him. Don't be intimidated, just trust your palate. The more educated you get, the more sophisticated your palate might get, but wherever you're at today, you say, I want a Rosé or white Zinfandel, and I may not drink them, but for you it's right, and have confidence in that."

Hicke: So now I have to ask, why is it out of print? Because I've looked around for a copy.

Meyer: We ran out. And we found last year that our printer or our publisher was not sending me the deserved royalties.

⁴ Amerine, Maynard A. and Vernon L. Singleton, *Wine: An Introduction to the Wines of the World, Grape Cultivation, Techniques of Winemaking, and How to Evaluate and Enjoy Wines*, University of California Press: 1965, 1977, 1978.

Hicke: Ouch!

Meyer: We went to him and said, "We can either start a lawsuit against you, or we would like to be the publisher of the book. So we'll forget what you owe us if you turn over the rights of the book to us," which he did. We've run out. In the meantime, we were novices on how to get a book published. In a month or so, I'm told that there will be new copies out.

Hicke: Oh, is that what it's going to look like? [points to books]

Meyer: Oh, well, I had some hard covers made when we did this.

Hicke: I haven't seen the hard cover.

Meyer: I had the hard covers made for libraries and things like that. But instead of saying Capra Press, Santa Barbara, it's going to say Meyer Enterprises.

Hicke: Oh, great.

Meyer: We're supposed to be out in a month or two with the new ones. We've found five or six typos that he didn't want to correct, reset, and whatever you have to do, my secretary has done that on the computer. It is generally a paperback. A friend of mine designed the cover--an artist friend of mine. Well, there's the picture right there. "Cascade of Cabernet," the picture that's on the cover. I had him make me about a hundred hard copies. These happen to be for my cousin and some of his friends. We're taking them out of the library until we get the new ones. I'm supposed to autograph them and send them to him. So it's been, you know--I'll tell you this. You'll never get rich writing books. We sold about 20,000 copies.

Hicke: That's pretty good.

Meyer: No other winemaker that I know of ever has written a book. I was getting all these inquiries from wine writers saying, "I'm going to write a book, would you answer these five pages?"

I said, "Why should I do this for him? I've got my own story I want to tell."

A lot of people have since asked, "Are you going to write another book? I really enjoyed that."

I said, "I think I said what I wanted to say. I think that another book would be artificial. This is really what I was thinking."

I took those notes. In fact what I did, for three winters, I rented a room over here in a Carmelite monastery and I would go over there when things were kind of slow around here. I'd go over there at 8 o'clock in the morning, go to church, and then at 8:30 or 9, I'd go up to the third floor to this ice cold room and I'd arrange my papers for this chapter and get everything in order. Then when finally in a week or two I'd done a chapter, then I'd take out my dictaphone and I'd just act as if I was talking to a class for a three-hour lecture. And that's what each chapter was, basically.

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Meyer: So many people say they're going to write a book about something or other. I'll tell you that book writing is an exercise of perseverance. About the third year, I was so sick of it, I just thought, "I can't finish this book." But being a good stubborn German, I said, "You've put in two winters already, crank it up and finish the last couple of chapters," which I did. It was fun to see it in print.

Hicke: Oh, yes. Well, I'm glad to hear that it's going to be in print again. How are you doing for time?

Meyer: Well, why don't we go to about what you consider halfway, at least.

Hicke: Well, it's hard to know what's halfway. As you can see, I want to get into much more of the story of Silver Oak.

Meyer: We're down to six [on this outline], which is Silver Oak?

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: Let's save it for tomorrow. I can look at this outline a little more closely and try to move it up a little quicker.

Hicke: [tape interruption] I've got the names of all your properties here. River's Edge and Miraval, Red Tail, and I want to hear about each one of those.

Winemaking Operations at Silver Oak

[Interview 2: December 3, 1999] ##

Hicke: This is interview two in the morning on December 3, 1999 and I'm just continuing with tape three. [tape interruption] Yesterday we got about as far as when you bought the property and we talked about Franciscan. You had just sold that and moved back here. So why don't we start with how you worked out the winemaking operations here? You had an old dairy barn, I think.

Meyer: As I told you, my partner (Ray Duncan from Denver) and I--I told him when we got together in 1972 that I was interested if he wanted to get into the wine business, because I've seen so many ups and downs in the grape and wine business that I thought that the only way to really avoid them was to integrate vineyard and winery. He had bought this property, and it was one of the last dairies in the Napa Valley. It was called the Keig Dairy, and as soon as I saw the old dairy milking barn, I said, "This is not a barn; this is winery here." It's just a matter of perspective. So we agreed to do the winery.

Our goal was to make at Silver Oak the best Cabernet we could make in small quantities. Then we had this 1,000 acres of vineyard we were planting, and we would do a second winery later on to take care of all the rest of the grapes.

I guess I picked one wine for two reasons: that it was kind of a reaction to my days at Christian Brothers, where we made so many wines it was hard to do them all right, and it was kind of in keeping with I thought--that Cabernets were what Napa and Sonoma did best, so why not devote our attention to that. This is a pretty common concept in France. In Bordeaux, for instance, they only grow Cabernet or Cabernet types, like Cabernet Franc, Petit Verdot, Merlot, and Malbec; whereas Pinot Noir is only in Burgundy. I felt that Cabernet was the best thing we did. We had frequently used First Growth Bordeaux as a marketing model for ourselves. I must say that I had never tried to make a Bordeaux-style wine. I think it'd be insane with our different growing conditions here.

Hicke: So you don't blend?

Meyer: We do. We are blending now. Our Alexander is 100 percent Cabernet, but we are using some Petit Verdot and Merlot and Cabernet Franc in our Napa Cabernet blend to make it very different from the Alexander. I liked some of their ideas, like making only one wine. Many times when I have to make a decision

on marketing or anything, I ask myself, "Well, what would a First Growth Bordeaux do in this situation?" In fact, as a sidelight, jokingly, when people ask me if I ever use artificial corks, I say, "You know, to cork your prized Cabernet with oak bark is insanity." Most of our quality control complaints come from the cork. But about a week after Chateau Margaux starts to use artificial corks, I'll use them. They may be a better closure, but it's a PR problem. It's a marketing problem.

Hicke: And that hasn't happened yet.

Meyer: And that hasn't happened, probably won't happen. I don't want to be a pioneer in that.

Hicke: Not in that sense.

Meyer: When you're fresh out of college, you want to be a pioneer, but it didn't take long for me to understand that you can tell a pioneer --they're the ones with the arrows in them. So I'm not in a big hurry to be a leader in many of these things.

Hicke: Well, let me just interrupt for a minute. Isn't making only one varietal being a pioneer of sorts?

Meyer: Well, it certainly is. In 1972 many of my co-winery owners thought I was crazy for just making one wine, and a red wine, when the white wine boom was on.

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: So that was a bit of a novel and daring approach, but I had nothing to lose. After fifteen years in the monastery, I had nowhere to go but up financially, and I took a big chance, but it worked very well.

Hicke: And Mr. Duncan went along?

Meyer: He went along with that. The first three years or so we had the wine crushed and fermented at Christian Brothers, and we brought it here to the dairy barn to age it in the barrels. Then in 1975 we bought Franciscan, and we crushed and fermented our Silver Oak from there until after we sold Franciscan. In fact, we signed a contract for ten years to buy some Alexander grapes from one of their vineyards and to have them crushed and fermented there. But they went through about three winemakers, and I got so frustrated working with a new winemaker every season, that I finally told them, "We'll build our own winery now, if you let us out of the contract." So we agreed to part ways.

Going through these notes that you have as guidelines, I think the real novel thing or unique thing about Silver Oak is several-fold. One, I'm a viticulturist and I believe that good wine starts with a vineyard, and without good grapes, you can't make good wine. Secondly, after some years of experimenting, we've gone exclusively to American oak, and so that gives a peculiar smell and taste to our wine. I like American oak better than French because it has more vanilla in the aroma and I like that. It's got less tannin taste, it extracts less wood tannin from American oak than French, and I like that. And there's some other point I'm missing there, but anyway, we went to completely American oak, and then we age our wine, oh, maybe 50 percent longer in the barrels than the competition.

First of all, all the wine is aged for about thirty months in fifty-gallon barrels, and most of our competitors age a maximum of eighteen to twenty-four months in the barrel, so they can get the wine out of the barrel, into the bottle, and make room by the second vintage. We go to thirty months, so it's almost 50 percent longer than most of our competition. Then we put it in the bottle. And our Alexander stays about a year to a year and a half in the bottle before it's released, and our Napa is almost two years in the bottle when it's released. We release the Alexander in August of the fourth year and the Napa in February of the fifth year, so it's got quite a bit more aging. That was one of our goals--was to distance ourselves from the competition by giving the wine special aging.

It was very painful in the beginning. Consider making '72, '73, '74, '75, '76 without ever selling a bottle of wine. We just were piling up inventory. I ate a lot of hamburger and beans in those days, but the good news is since we started selling it with this additional age, we haven't had to spend many marketing dollars. It has simply sold itself.

The marketing concept of only one varietal has been magic. When we're in a room with many wineries, pouring our wines for a tasting, people will come up to say, "I want to try your Chardonnay." We say, "Well, we only make Cabernet Sauvignon." Their immediate reaction: "Oh, it must be good if you only do one thing. We'll be back when we're tasting red wine." So we have them mentally conditioned to want to like our wines, and of course we have to live up to that. We have to present them with a decent wine, but we think with the additional aging and the good grapes that we have, that we're able to do that.

Hicke: Let me just stop you for a minute here and say that I think you pioneered in several areas here. First of all, in the aging, as you've just pointed out, and then in using American oak, that's

the second thing. But also, in the seventies, people were not all that interested in the vineyard as the source of the good wines. They thought that the winemaker had all of the power.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: So I think you were way ahead on all those scores.

Meyer: I think some winemakers take a lot more credit that they deserve.

Hicke: [laughs]

Meyer: If you have good grapes, you have to be pretty incompetent not to make good wine. And if you don't have good grapes, it's very difficult to make a top-class wine. The American oak thing--we have always been proud of the fact that we use American oak. There are lot of competitors who use it but don't tell you about it or tell you they use French oak. More and more, it's coming out in the open now that a lot of people are using American oak.

But we really had to educate these coopers, these barrel makers. They started making Bourbon barrels, and they'd make them completely different. You don't air dry them, you kiln dry them, and then you really char them. We want a lighter toast, so we had to educate them about all these things. Air drying and the amount of char and toastiness and so on. So I think now we're making a barrel very similar in many respects to French oak, and yet there are quite a few differences because of the source of the oak. Since I'm used to American oak, I smell another wine that's been aged in French oak and I can pick it right out. People who deal more exclusively in French oak can pick ours out, too--and so it has its own identity.

Hicke: Well, let's get back, before we move on, to the dairy barn. What did you have to do to that?

Meyer: It was an old stucco building, not very attractive at all. It had an open attic, no ceiling. It had big holes in the wall where the cows used to butt their heads when they were being milked. It had windows which we had to put wood shutters in front of to black out. We insulated it, put a ceiling in, and put air conditioning in there, so for about ten years it was very humble. And it still is. You can still tell it was once a dairy barn. About eight years ago, I think it was, there was a big winery taking some redwood tanks out of service, and I bought a couple of them and took them to a mill and had them mill them and brought them down and put them up on the walls, and it's quite attractive now. We use it for a certain amount of PR for VIP tastings and when the tasting room is overflowing. But it's still a cellar--it still

has some barrels in it. But it's not very efficient or functional.

Hicke: Yes, but fun for tastings, I would think.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: What kind of equipment did you buy?

Meyer: Well, like I said yesterday, when something comes along that we like, we buy it. It doesn't have to be all one manufacturer. If you're buying a bottling line, you might have pieces from five different countries on that bottling line. Same thing out there with the crushing and fermenting. Right now our tanks are stainless tanks and are all American made from Santa Rosa Stainless and a place called Mueller Stainless back in Missouri. Our crusher was manufactured in Healdsburg--Healdsburg Machine Shop, which is no longer in business. Our presses are Vaslin, which are French. So a whole conglomeration of things--pumps and soon--just whatever catches our eye as a new concept or a good concept, we've bought over the years.

Hicke: But you had to start out with something. I mean, you needed something right away if you were going to--

Meyer: Well, we had our fermenting and crushing done down at Christian Brothers for three years, and then we went over to Franciscan and there was a crusher, fermenter, and bottling line, so we used that until the early eighties.

Hicke: But when you came back?

Meyer: In '81, '82 we built this first building, and we put a bottling line in it, and I bought a used bottling line from Sutter Home, and it was a conglomeration of things. Then we built the new building in '87, and we updated the fermenting room and the bottling room with better equipment, newer equipment. So it's just kind of been a catch as catch can--what do you need, what's available, what do you think's good--go from there.

Hicke: What was the first vintage that you did here on this property?

Meyer: The first vintage would have been 1982. We bottled the 1979 here. The first vintage, the '72, was bottled here by hand, and then '73 through '78 was bottled at Franciscan. You'll see if you ever saw a label, it would say Rutherford.

Then the '79 was bottled here.

In the early days, since we didn't crush and ferment for ourselves, we couldn't say "Produced and bottled by," we had to say, according to the government, "Cellared and bottled by." Even when we owned both Franciscan and Silver Oak, the exact same owners, they still wouldn't let us say, "Produced and bottled by," because they were different facilities, different bonded wineries. When we finally moved over here and we did it all ourselves, we had chosen simply not to change it, because it gives us more flexibility if you say, "Cellared and bottled by," and it hasn't hurt our sales.

Hicke: I wouldn't think anybody would notice that, even, unless they're a real wine--

Meyer: Well, when I was a student at Davis, I remember Dr. Amerine telling us that you couldn't get a top price for your wine if it didn't say, "Produced and bottled by," because some of the competitive wineries in those days--the big guys like Almaden and Paul Masson--bought a lot of bulk wine to put in their blends, so they had to say, "Cellared and bottled by," or, "Made and bottled by." But it's never been a factor for us, and there have been some years when I've seen some Cabernet on the bulk wine market that maybe is better than the poorer stuff we had, so we bought that Cabernet and sold ours and upgraded somewhat. So it's been a very handy thing, and it just doesn't seem to affect us. I can count on one hand the number of people who have brought to my attention that we aren't, "Produced and bottled by."

Hicke: Yes, I would think maybe a distributor might notice that, but wouldn't think any consumer would pay much attention to that.

Vineyard Properties

Hicke: How did the vineyards evolve? You sold some and bought more, as I recall.

Meyer: As I said yesterday, we had a twenty-acre Cabernet vineyard in the Alexander Valley and that's why we started with an Alexander wine. Then I just got to really like them, so we planted more up there. And 80 percent of our production now is our Alexander Valley label.

Hicke: What's the vineyard for that?

Meyer: We now have four vineyard sites in the Alexander Valley. Miraval --we had a name-the-vineyard contest with our employees, so we

wouldn't just call it by the former owners' name, and Miraval means in Spanish, "View of the Valley," and we have a nice hill where you can see the whole valley. That's about a hundred acres on Highway 128. Then we have Red Tail down on Chalk Hill Road. That's about fifty acres. Then we have Rivers Edge up just outside of Geyserville on the Russian River. That's another fifty acres. And we have about twenty acres at the Alexander Valley winery property, and when we bought that winery, we had twenty acres of vineyard which--and we weren't looking for a vineyard; we were looking for a winery to process our grapes from the Alexander Valley. The winery had previously been called Lyeth. They went bankrupt and we bought it and made it Silver Oak of Alexander Valley. We make all of our Alexander up there at that facility and make all of our Napa here.

Hicke: That's up there in the very north part of the Alexander Valley appellation.

Meyer: It's just north of Geyser Peak [Winery] on 101.

Hicke: Yes. Do each one of these vineyards have different terroirs, so to speak?

Meyer: They're quite different. They produce different kinds of quality. The Miraval and the Red Tail we really like, although they're quite different. But they blend together well.

Hicke: What kind of soils do they have?

Meyer: The Red Tail is more of a red soil, hillside soil. A little better soil at Miraval: not so harsh growing conditions, although they're both kind of on rolling hills, but Red Tail more so. Then we have a third vineyard up there we call River's Edge--fifty acres. We consider it our toughest vineyard. We've done a lot of experimentation to try to get the best quality possible from that vineyard, and we will continue to work with it. And the winery I really view as landscaping: we get about a ton to the acre and there's a lot of what you call Serpentine soil. But the vineyard looks good around the winery, so we keep it there for that reason.

Hicke: [laughs] It's a beautiful tasting room in the building and all that.

Meyer: Yes. I don't know if you've seen our new tasting room or not. You went through the courtyard?

Hicke: Yes, we were up there about a month or two ago, I think. Yes, it's really nice. Okay, so that's the Alexander Valley vineyards. And can you tell me about the Napa Valley vineyards?

Meyer: Well, we started Alexander in 1972 and we didn't start Napa until 1979.

Hicke: You'd been planting down here.

Meyer: We didn't own too much vineyard in those days. We sold off most of our Napa vineyards with Franciscan.

Hicke: Why was that?

Meyer: Because the Germans wanted some land to go along with the winery, and we just didn't think we needed it. We sold Franciscan in 1979, and that was the same year we started the Napa. I owned a little vineyard across the road. I still own the property, but we just tore the vineyard out because of Pierce's Disease and Eutypa and we'll be replanting it next year to--

Hicke: Across that road?

Meyer: Yes. Across the Oakville crossroad, beyond Groth Winery, about a mile and a half from here.

I started making the Napa primarily because I guess the critics tended to like a wine with more tannin, and even though our Alexander was extremely popular, I thought about the amount of people who like a more tannic, bigger wine, and we made the Napa to give you a distinctive choice between a silky smooth Alexander and a more austere, tannic Napa. We started that in 1979. I experimented around with various vineyards looking for the right grapes and the right combination in '79, and I'd say it was about 1982 that we really started to produce good Napa quality. We had found the vineyards we liked and--[pause]

Hicke: Tell me about the vineyards.

Meyer: Well, we have one grower in the valley named Hewitt and I ran across his wine. Christian Brothers had some bulk wine for sale and I tasted it and I really liked it. I bought it and I asked where it came from, and they said a guy named Hewitt up above St. Helena. They were going to discontinue him because their business wasn't going that well, so they didn't need the grapes. So I went up and signed a contract with him, and he's still a grower for us to this day.

He used to be our primary Napa grower, and then he got phylloxera, so we had to replace him, and I chose to do it with about ten different growers of ten tons each, so we wouldn't be too dependent on anybody until we knew what we liked. Then his came back into production, so his grapes have kind of fueled our

Napa expansion over the years. We have about four growers now who are on ten-year contracts whose grapes we really like. Then we have some growers on two-year contracts that are a notch below. And we just bought a \$13 million vineyard in Napa last year, ourselves. We experimented with some of the grapes and sold off some of the other grapes. I really view that vineyard as: if we can use it, okay, but it's got to be able to stand on its own, pay its bills selling grapes, because it's half Merlot and half Cabernet, and I don't want to crush that much Merlot here at Silver Oak. I don't want to change our marketing plan by getting huge. So we're going to use what we can and sell off the rest.

Hicke: What vineyard is that? Does it have a name?

Meyer: Yes, we call it Soda Canyon Vineyard, because that's where it is. I live right next door to it, coincidentally. I didn't plan it that way, but I bought a new house down there two years ago by Silverado Country Club. Then we bought this Soda Canyon Vineyard last January.

Pricing and Distribution

Meyer: I see you have a note here that I think it's very important: establishing a price niche.

Hicke: Yes. I was just going to get to that.

Meyer: I think marketing is extremely important. And let's see, the four P's of marketing are product, package, pricing, and promotion.

I think when you first start you have to consider which part of the spectrum you want to compete in. Your prices have to be competitive. Of course, cost determines a lot in your price, and the fact that we give our wine at least a year extra age than most competitors, and we use a lot of new barrels--in fact, the Napa goes into totally new barrels every vintage and stays there for thirty months. And for the next vintage we use new barrels again.

The Alexander--we don't like so much oak on our Alexander. It's a more delicate wine, and it doesn't stand up well to a lot of oak, so we put half of the vintage in the new oak and half in the once-used oak and then blend them back together, and it doesn't tend to get so oakey. Our goal is to make the best and pay whatever it costs, and so we have to charge a pretty healthy price. We don't want to compete with the big boys--it would kill

us anyway. We don't want to be that high-volume, low-profit business.

Hicke: By big boys you mean big production?

Meyer: Yes. The strategy is to get them in your corner. Don't let them get you in their corner. [laughs]

We've been able to compete quite well with that premise, that we're trying to make top-end Cabernet. Some people believe we are. We're having no trouble in sales. Our pricing is rather high, and yet we're selling everything out.

Hicke: I heard somebody down at the tasting room saying every restaurant only gets one case per year.

Meyer: Oh, that's not true. They didn't really know what they were saying.

Hicke: Maybe I didn't understand it correctly.

Meyer: Every restaurant--every account is allocated how much they'll get for the year, and whether it's three cases or twelve cases, they know going into the year. They receive a letter saying, "You took eleven cases last year, and based on a slight increase in production, we're able to give you twelve cases this year," so they know that's what they're going to get for the year. They have about nine months to take that wine, and they may take it a case or two a month. We don't force them to take it all at once, but once we get to about nine months down the road, we call them up and say, "Do you want this or not? We've been holding it for five years now, you can hold it three months."

Hicke: [laughs]

Meyer: "And if you don't want it, I'm going to sell it to somebody who does want it." They know what their allocation is and then they base their prices accordingly.

Hicke: Yes, they can put it on their list with reasonable assurance that they can get some more.

Meyer: Yes. A lot of our accounts don't even put it on the list, because they say, "You don't give me enough. If I put it on the list, it would just go out of here in two months and you couldn't give me any more. So I hand-sell it personally to my better customers."

We have many retailers who may get twenty-five to fifty cases a year and they have it all sold before it arrives. As soon as

it's released they call for it. They call up their twenty-five best customers and say, "I've got your case of Silver Oak," and they come down and get it, and it never gets on the shelf.

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Hicke: Do you have a distributor?

Meyer: Our method of distribution is this: I've got about five people who work for me as sales persons on the payroll, and we always chose to do this from the beginning so we could control our own destiny. And as I told you, in the early years, my wife did all of our sales anyway.

Now we've got two ladies and three men and they cover the United States for us. In California we are our own wholesaler, so we sell the wine directly to the retailer or the restaurateur. I've got three sales people who have split up California. They call directly on those approximately 2,000 accounts and say, "Do you want some Silver Oak or are you still in supply? Or do you need more cases? We'll go back and ship it to you."

Then, each one of those five salesmen also has some out-of-state responsibility. We can't deal in another state without a licensed wholesaler in that state. Let's just take an example of New York. It's a long way away. We couldn't do it if we wanted to, so we have a wholesaler who represents us in New York. We sell the wine to him, and he goes on calls to the retailers and restaurateurs. One of our salesmen is in charge of being his liaison person and checking up on him, making sure we're in the accounts we want to be in, making sure he's not dumping our wine in a discount retailer or something. Making sure that he's not gouging on the prices.

These people will have some out-of-state responsibility and, depending on how important the state is, they may go there three times a year, they may go there two times a year, they may only go there once. They may go to Texas or Colorado and spend a whole week--go to Denver, go to Boulder, go to whatever--and call on the accounts and maybe do a salesman meeting while they're there to make sure they know how to sell Silver Oak and know the pertinent points. They may go out and do a winemakers dinner, so to speak, where people come and taste our wines and taste our new wines and have a dinner. They may spend the whole week in some of the more important markets. There are other states like North Dakota, where maybe we go there every three years and then do all of our business on the phone because what they sell is not very much and we can't give them any more, so why waste those salesmen's time? It'll cost us more to send him there than we're doing business.

We're also in about twenty countries outside the United States. We probably could sell all our wine in the U.S., but we've taken the attitude, number one, if you're going to be a world-class wine, you've got to be in the world; it can't be just in the United States. And number two, if the U.S. market ever gets soft, we want these avenues of distribution already set up. So we're in Japan and Singapore and Hong Kong and so on. We're not in France. We are in Italy. We are in Switzerland. London is actually our biggest export market, and it's only about 120 cases a year. We range from 25 cases to 150. We do about 2,000 cases out of 50,000 out of the country. But at least we have a presence, and those people get to taste our wine now and then.

Hicke: They probably would get more if they could.

Meyer: If we had more, we'd ship more. Maybe in the future as we grow from 50,000 to 70,000 cases, that will be our target market. We don't know yet. Of course those are less profitable because of the hassle to supply wine. When we have extra wine to sell, we give our tasting room first option. That's our highest profit margin.

Hicke: How many cases do you sell out of the tasting room?

Meyer: I should be able to answer that. We sell about 15 percent of our wine out of the tasting room. About 30 percent of our wine in California. So that's 45 percent. So the other 55 percent would be in the rest of the world.

Hicke: That's a lot from the tasting room.

Meyer: We do a tremendous business from the tasting room. It's astounding. Some of our Silver Oak lovers have come here looking for the place and buy wine. Right now the tasting room is on one bottle per customer allocation. That's all we'll sell you.

Hicke: I heard them say that.

Meyer: Because we're so short on wine.

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: We have to get through 'til February when our Napa will be released. My salesroom manager tells me we're going to last until about the middle of December and then we're going to have to take some wine out of the library and put a high price on it and say, "Well, we do have some wine to sell but it's fairly high priced," and, "Take it or leave it."

Hicke: Maybe you should go on vacation instead. [laughs]

Meyer: Well, I had brought that up, but the employees don't much care for that idea. So why don't we just sell it out? Why do we go on allocation? Sell it out by the case and close the tasting room? We have about nine people who work down there. They don't like that idea.

Hicke: Yes. Well, if you do that, if you pull out library wine, will you let people taste that, also?

Meyer: No we don't.

Hicke: Yes, that would really--

Meyer: You know, supposedly they've seen it in the past when it was a current vintage. And these people know. When we take out ten years of wines, there are vintages they zero in on that we think are the better ones, and they know are the better ones. So like '85 will go very quickly and something like '76, which was a light year, it will drag on forever. So they know what they're looking for.

Hicke: Well, let's go back: tell me how you established this tremendous demand and acclaim? Obviously you made good wine, but how did people discover it?

Meyer: Well, in my wildest dreams at Davis, I never thought it would go this way. We had a dream and a goal to make the best Cabernet possible, and there are some people who think we do that, but I know it's a very subjective thing. But we found enough customers to make a living at it.

Hicke: That's what I meant. How did the word--

Meyer: In the early days we would enter competitions like the LA [Los Angeles] fair--our '74 vintage got the gold medal in the LA fair. We would send lots of material out to wine writers when we released a wine, so they would taste it and write it up. Nowadays we don't enter any competitions because it's a no-win situation. If we lose the competition, our reputation would be tainted. And if we win it, we can't sell it any faster. So we stay out of competitions.

There is one wine writer named Robert Parker who in the 1982 vintage, he wrote up our wine. We had never had any trouble selling it up 'til then. We usually got the vintage sold out within the calendar year and then released the next vintage. He wrote up the '82, how wonderful it was, and from then on, our wine

has run out early. He continues to like our wine. He gives us very high scores. But it's kind of interesting. The *Wine Spectator*, I would say, likes a more tannic wine than we make, and we don't get terribly great scores from the *Wine Spectator*. But Parker thinks we're all right, and that's all we need.

Hicke: [laughs] Apparently so.

Meyer: I think we're in a position now where if none of them wrote us up, it would probably sell on its own. But in the early days, we went out of our way to provide this material to wine writers and competitions, and now we're a little more low-key because we can't meet the demand.

Hicke: Yes. We've got some other things to discuss, but I keep thinking of things that aren't on the list. I want to hear about the tasting room. Was that opened at the time you built this building?

Meyer: When we built this building we put in that tasting room downstairs, but we never conceived that this many people would come. In fact, we were going to put a little sign down there that said, "For help, ring the bell." [laughter] And somebody would come.

Hicke: And now you have nine people--employees--down there.

Meyer: Now we have probably nine people. They don't all work at once, of course, but on Saturdays we get very crowded. Fridays--you may even see it when you leave. About eleven on Friday morning, people are starting their weekend--they're in here tasting wine, getting wine.

We're closed on Sundays. It's just a kind of religious belief of mine that, "The Good Lord has taken care of me, and I am going to recognize Sunday as a day of rest." My employees love it. While all the other winery tasting rooms are open, they're off. In fact, we've instigated a policy around here--because of our shortage of wine, we started closing for the entire holiday weekend--like Thanksgiving. We're closed Thursday through Sunday and we just let the employees--all the production and office people had it off, now all the tasting room people get it off and they love it.

Hicke: Oh, absolutely.

Meyer: I don't know if we'll ever go back to when we used to be closed Thanksgiving and open Friday and Saturday, then closed Sunday. I don't know if we'll ever go back to it, if we ever have enough

wine with these slight increases. But I'm happy enough to give them off and things seem to take care of themselves.

Hicke: Are the people that come in mostly return customers, or people who have never been here before and never had your wine?

Meyer: In the early days we had a lot of drop-ins, although we don't advertise on the highway or anywhere else.

Hicke: Yes, I know. You can hardly find it.

Meyer: But we saw people coming back and coming back to get samples, so we instigated a charge for tasting--five dollars for tasting, figuring, "If they won't pay five for tasting, they won't pay thirty or forty or fifty--whatever it was then, so we don't want them around here. But most of these people are Silver Oak drinkers and looking for the source of Silver Oak and get a big kick out of coming here, tasting, and--

Hicke: They come once every day for a week to get their one bottle?

Meyer: [laughs] Well, see, with the Alexander, for instance, we released it August 1 and we had a two-case limit, and that lasted about a week. I insisted that the real buyers get to buy more than the case for at least a week. Then we drop to a case. Then when it kept moving too fast, we dropped to six bottles. Then we went to three bottles, then two bottles, now one bottle, and we're going to run out mid-December.

Hicke: You have to tell yourself it's nice to be needed!

Meyer: Well, it is, but you know, I don't buy wines much any more. I used to. I have a huge cellar, but I would buy in seven-case lots if I liked something because my bins held four cases, and then I'd built up a cellar for each of my three children, so that on their twenty-first birthday I give them around 200 cases for a birthday present, going back to their birth year.

Hicke: Very nice!

Meyer: And so I started putting wines away for them. I'd buy them each a case of something I liked and put it away, and so I'd be almost insulted if you told me I could only buy a case, let alone one bottle. I'd say, "Well, I'll go look for something else. That won't do me any good."

Hicke: What do you have in your cellar? What do you like?

Meyer: A lot of people ask me that, and I ought to sit down one day and analyze what I have the most of, but I don't have any definite buying patterns. I just run across something I like or something at a tasting that I like and I buy. Or I have a lot of friends in the wine industry who want to trade me, so I trade them a case for theirs. I don't know if there's a specific pattern or not. I ought to try to analyze that, because I get that question often.

Hicke: Style?

Meyer: I don't prefer the big, tannic wines, and I don't much care to look for the 250-case production wines. They get all these rave notices. I would like them available and I like to go down to my corner store or to the winery and buy whatever I want to buy. Now I'm sixty-one years old and I've got more wine--couple thousand cases--than I can ever drink in my lifetime.

Hicke: Got any grandchildren? Store up for them? [laughter]

Meyer: Well, the kids have their cellars, so I'm going to have to get it to them. And there's an old saying, don't leave your kids your wine, leave them your money. [laughter] But I don't think I'll ever drink up all of mine or I'd be dopey.

Hicke: Yes. How about whites? Do you like whites?

Meyer: Well, whites--I don't drink a lot of whites, I would prefer a red most of the time, but I drink some Chardonnay. I really like Rombauer [Vineyards] Chardonnay. I'm drinking a lot of that these days and Stony Hill is a friend of mine and I trade him for some wines. Groth, there's a neighbor and a friend and I drink his Chardonnay. But I probably drink nine bottles of red to one bottle of white. My wife likes a little sparkling wine, so I keep around a little Schramsburg, a little Mumms, a little Domaine Chandon, things like that. If I never drink another sparkling in my life, it'll be okay with me. But we keep it for special occasions and if she wants some.

Hicke: Got enough for the millenium?

Meyer: [laughs] I'm sure, because I'll probably be drinking red wine, anyway.

Hicke: [laughs] You've got enough wine!

Meyer: I know. They took it off my desk, but somebody for my fiftieth birthday, one of my wine friends, gave me a big brass spigot--wine spigot--and on the base it says, "The first obligation of all wines is to be red." [laughter]

Hicke: That fits your philosophy.

Meyer: That's something I like to say, and so this guy had it inscribed and he gave it to me.

Hicke: That's great. Did we finish price niche? Actually establishing the price, you didn't really talk about.

Meyer: I've been very conservative about prices. We tried to establish a price that would say we're a top quality Cabernet, but some of the other wineries have been much more aggressive than we in pricing. We're not cheap. Our Alexander is \$50 a bottle and our Napa is \$75, but there are a lot of people over \$100 now. And it is a problem. If you've got these ten wineries making Cabernet and charging a hundred bucks for it, and you're at \$50, you can't say you're as good as them, because the public, if they don't know, they'll say, "Oh, sure, that's why you only charge that, huh? Because you're as good as that." So I think pricing is an important part of your strategy.

But we move very conservatively. We're making enough money and the government gets half of it anyway, so it's taken away my incentive to really go out and charge. But I think the people who you really consider your competition--if you're not in their price category, you won't be their competition much longer. We do price surveys occasionally, and especially when we're making pricing decisions, what enters into that is the cost of production, the cost of the competition, and how you compare quality-wise to the competition. I'm a firm believer that if you're going to change your price, you're better off to make a substantial jump every two or three years than make a little jump every year and keep changing your price. I'd rather go from fifty to fifty-five, say every two or three years, than go from fifty to fifty-two to fifty-four to fifty-six--and I think people just say, "Wow, we're being had. We're just being hammered every year."

Hicke: I think people get upset if they find within one year the price has gone up.

Meyer: Well, that's something we've never done. If we come out with a wine at a certain price, it stays that price the whole year. The only time we change it--we have a library program, where this February when we release the Napa '95, we'll also re-release some '94, '93, '92, and '91, and of course they go up a little every year in price because we have to hold them and forego the sales of them, those older wines go up. They're here just on a one bottle limit all year long, so that at least if you like the '92 you can come here when it's first released and buy a bottle and take it home.

Hicke: How much do you set aside for the library for each vintage?

Meyer: 500 cases. Then what we do for five years: the first year, we sell half or 250 cases of it, so we have 250 left; the next year we sell 125, the next year we sell half of that and half of that and you do that five years and you're out. [laughs] But on release day down here you can buy, oh, ten or twenty different vintages if you want.

Hicke: I bet there's a line down to the main highway.

Meyer: We don't like to talk about it, because the county gets upset about how many visitors we're supposed to have, but release day last August we had 4,000 people, and they bought a million and a half dollars worth of wine at the winery. It's pretty mind-boggling.

Hicke: It really is mind-boggling. Actually you should go on vacation for the rest of the year after that.

Meyer: I'm considering that. [laughter]

Hicke: Are there some vineyards here in Napa that we didn't talk about? For instance, Bonny's Vineyard?

Meyer: Well, Bonny's Vineyard is my house across the road.

Hicke: Oh, okay.

Meyer: We made three Cabernets at one time: Alexander and Napa and a Bonny's Vineyard Napa, but the Bonny's Vineyard is only four acres in front of the house, and we would make 500 to 800 cases, and it got to be such a marketing headache. We made more people mad with that wine than we made happy, because we had lots of customers who didn't get one bottle because when you spread it around the U.S. it gets pretty thin. It raised a lot of disgruntle, so I said, "We can't handle that. I'll discontinue it."

Up 'til this year, when it just got thrown out, the Bonny's grapes have gone in the Napa blend because it is a Napa wine. We're going to replant it, but it'll just go into the Napa. As long as I'm around, I don't think we'll ever have a Bonny's Vineyard again.

Yeast and Fermentation

Hicke: We also didn't talk about yeast. Is there anything to be said about that?

Meyer: Oh, we use several different types of yeast. For years we used only Champagne yeast and we liked that. Now we use a couple other different kinds of yeast. When the fermentation is slowed down, we feed it in, and they ferment better than champagne yeast when it gets low on sugar and cool. We have a certain kind of yeast that we're using up at the Alexander Valley for one property there that we think is helpful, but I don't think it's a big deal.

On fermentation, we have tried several methods. Typically we simply circulate the tank twice a day for about twenty or thirty minutes at a time, so you pump the juice over the skins and extract the color and tannins. We have tried a rotary fermenter that churns like a cement mixer and mixes up the grapes. We have tried what they call cold soaking before the fermentation, before you add the yeast. And we have tried maceration, which is after the fermentation finishes and goes dry, you leave the skins in for a period of time--and some people think the tannins get softer. The bottom line of it is that we tend to like the traditional method best, and we no longer do any maceration, and we sold our rotary fermenter.

The reason though that we sold the rotary fermenter was it was a 9,000 gallon tank on its side out here, and we felt that it applied better to the Alexander grapes than to the Napa. We used to make them both here and do the Alexander in there. Well, we moved the Alexander up there, this tank was so big we couldn't even get it in the building, so we sold it to someone else. I hope someday to put in a couple of smaller rotary fermenters that will fit in that building. It's just a matter of finding the space.

Hicke: So you actually thought that was a reasonable way to do it?

Meyer: Yes. I was in Australia a couple of years ago when my boy was over there and we visited some wineries and they have a lot of rotary fermenters, but primarily because they don't have many people. They don't have much labor, so they have to be very mechanized. But I see more and more rotary fermenters coming to California now. So it has a place.

There are some things it does well and there are something things it doesn't do so well. It tends to extract more, and so for our wine where we're trying to make a kind of finesse wine, it

can be a little over-extractive. You can get sufficient color extraction in four days rather than seven or ten, and if you're in a hurry, you can move wine through that much faster than the traditional method, so it would pay to have one or two around to use for special occasions. But I felt that if we got too heavy, then our style would change, because it tended to make a heavier, more tannic wine.

More on Winemaking Style

Hicke: Is there anything in your winemaking style that we haven't covered?

Meyer: Well, I told you yesterday, when I set out to make Silver Oak, my feeling was that wine is food and it should taste good. And that's kind of a novel approach if you think about it. Some people are making an art piece that makes a statement, but isn't necessarily enjoyable to drink. Sometimes the press gets all excited about these things, but they don't sell all that well, necessarily. So we wanted to make a finesse-style table wine, food wine, and we do that by the grapes, by the prolonged aging--both in the barrel and in the bottle--so that certainly has been part of our style. I think you can certainly recognize Silver Oak.

One of the problems we have in our blind tastings with our employees is they can recognize it. We give them about four or five cases a year on Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Easter, and then they buy their wine at 50 percent discount, so they're probably more in tune with the style than I am, because I taste a lot of other wines. My cellar has got lots of other peoples' wines, because I'm not going to learn anything drinking my own wine, so if I taste some wine that there's something I like, I buy some, I keep tasting it occasionally and say, "What is it that I like about that wine that I can incorporate into our style?" And we'll put out that tasting: A-B-C-D-E-F-G. And they all say, "Well, D is Silver Oak and we like it best." [laughter]

Come on. Give me a break. How can you tell that? They're right most of the time. They've got a company palate, because of the style that we're trying to make. And so they're not very objective, because they pick ours right out, even blind, and they say, "D is it and we like it number one." So at least they're getting somewhat educated, but--

Hicke: So you have to find out what they like number two.

Meyer: Yes. [laughs]

Hicke: I have a question here on risk-taking. Obviously wine and agriculture--it's all risky.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: How do you feel about that?

Meyer: Well, first of all, you have to be about half crazy to be in the agriculture business, because so many things can happen. You know, a typical farmer--it's either too hot, too cold, too warm, too wet, too dry--so just growing grapes is a risk. Making only one product is a big risk. But if you really get it in your blood and you love it, it doesn't seem like a lot of risk, so it's not something that scares you, it's just something you have to deal with--and I love winemaking. I recently spoke to a group when I got this merit award, and I told these young winemakers, "I've never had a day in my life when I'm not looking forward to going to work." I never woke up and said, "God, I have to go to work today." I just can't wait to get there, to see what adventure lies ahead.

Hicke: Oh, that's marvelous.

Meyer: I think that it doesn't seem like a big risk when you feel that way. And I think a lot of people in the business feel that way. I rode with a salesman one time in Arizona and it was a Friday and he said, "Boy, the weekend starts tomorrow." And he said, "I live for the weekend."

I thought, "You poor devil," you know. "Weekends are only two-sevenths of your time and you work five-sevenths and you look forward to weekends." I look forward to weekends, but I really enjoy my work.

Hicke: That's great.

Meyer: It's just a blessing, you know.

We try to make this a fun working place, good conditions, good benefits, good salary, so that everybody feels that way. I think that has to do partly with our success, that the people around here really feel like part of the family. I think I've convinced them that if we don't all do our job to the best of our ability, we don't perform as well as we can, so we don't have bonuses to give and vacations to give.

Medical benefits and all the things that they have are because we're successful. We'll share it with them, but if anybody falls down, we all fall down. I think they really believe that, and down to the gardener, he wants the place to look nice so when you walk in, your first impression is good and the wines bear that out.

Hicke: Yes, it's obviously a successful way to do it.

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Hicke: At what point did you hire a winemaker?

Meyer: About four or five years ago. I did it all up until then, and then I decided--well, number one I wanted this place to live without me. If I ever got killed in an accident or fell over dead, I didn't want everything to stop. I don't want to be the only one who knows how things work. So I appointed one of our people as general manger in charge of administration and sales and hired a winemaker and took a few years to break him in. Now he's completely in charge.

Hicke: Daniel Baron?

Meyer: Daniel Baron, and I'm just a consultant to both of them. I only work on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I meet with the general manager, Dave Cofran, on Thursdays and go over that end of the business and then on Tuesdays, if there are any wines to taste or any production things to talk about, I do that with Daniel then.

Hicke: And then I have Tim Duncan on my list.

Meyer: He's my partner's son and he's the national sales manager. He's got four people working for him.

V OTHER ACTIVITIES

Meyer Family Port

Hicke: Now Meyer Family Port. When did that happen?

Meyer: Well, some years ago, I started aging this port. Christian Brothers made a Zinfandel Port that I really liked, and when they sold out to Heublein, I went to Heublein and said, "Do you plan to make port?" They said no, and I said, "Well, I'd like to buy any bulk port you've got left." They had one tank of Zinfandel port-- I don't know if it was 2,000 or 4,000 gallons--so I bought it.

My wife said, "What are you going to do with all that port?"

"Well, if it doesn't sell, I'll drink it." [laughter]

So since 1987, I have just been looking on the open market for bulk old port that's for sale. Like those bottles over there -- people send you a sample of port, so--I don't actually make the port; if I like something I buy it and I put it in that blend.

Then about four years ago we started to bottle for the first time, so it's had about eight years in the barrel. It's definitely a tawny port, which means slightly brown, which means it's had a lot of barreling. Then we bottled it. And two years ago we started to sell it, so we're on our second vintage--almost out of it now.

It's not really a vintage. It's what you'd call a solera system, which means that from four years ago 'til now, each year you take out some of the blend to bottle, and then you put last years' new wine into that blend and let it sit for a year, and then do the same thing again. So you kind of achieve a continuity hopefully, and it's got an average age of almost ten years on it. You can calculate the average age by the amount you put in, the amount you take out, and so on.

I just like port, and I think there's a market for good port. It's not a big market, but the people I know particularly that drink wine like a little port after dinner. So I said to my partner, "I've got three kids, and you've got four, Ray, and Silver Oak is not going to run as smoothly with seven owners as it has with two, so I'm going to start a little port operation on the side for my kids to fall back on." So I started this thing and created a limited liability company called Meyer Family Port. Each of my three children own a quarter of it and my wife and I in trust own a quarter of it.

We just bought a winery up near Booneville that's going to probably be the home of Meyer Port. Up 'til now we brought it here to Silver Oak and aged it in barrels up on the top of the rack and bottled it here, but probably pretty soon we're going to do it there. I'm just kind of stalling, waiting for my twenty-two year old son to finish his master's degree at Davis and hopefully take over. I don't know what we're going to do if he doesn't. I might hire somebody. I might just sell the whole darn thing. I don't know.

Hicke: Where do you get the wine? From whom?

Meyer: Well, like I say, for a while I got it all over, whatever was available. But there was one supplier who I consistently like their product, named Eastside Winery or Royal Host Winery in Lodi, and so two years ago I signed a contract with them to make me Zinfandel port with what's called pot-still brandy. They make it --like the '99 they just made, they sent me a sample and we'll bring it in here about the end of the year or the first of next year, then take out enough to bottle for this year and put it in the blend. We're only making about--the first year we made I think 1,100 cases, then 1,300 last year we were selling. We'll get up to around 1,300 or 1,500. I don't see it as a big deal, unless my son wants to crank it up, but I think there's a limit.

Hicke: I think the bottle and the label--if you call it that--is wonderful. That's quite unique.

Meyer: Very attractive. My wife did that, too.

Hicke: If I can describe it, it's painted on? There's no paper label.

Meyer: Silkscreen.

Hicke: And the bottle is unusual.

Meyer: The bottle is Italian-made. We just liked the shape of it.

Hicke: Yes. It's very nice.

Meyer: And so we ordered some.

Hicke: And is the silk-screening done here, then?

Meyer: In Oakland. We bring the bottles over and silkscreen them first and then fill them.

The Future at Silver Oak

Hicke: I see. Before we get onto more general things, tell me what you see for the future here at Silver Oak. You've talked a little bit about that.

Meyer: I think our focus will continue to be on quality rather than quantity. The salesmen are always badgering me because everybody is crying for more wine. I got home last night--I had to go to a dinner--and my wife said Vince Petrucci, who is a professor of viticulture at Fresno State, he called and, "He wants some wine for Christmas, and I told him we were out." Actually my secretary told him that we were out, so he went to my wife, and then he called me. I said, "Look, Vince. I'll take a case out of my personal cellar, and charge you for it, but there is no wine. That's all that's left."

But why did I get on that?

Hicke: Future.

Meyer: So I think even though we want to make a little more as we go along to keep these people happy and not alienate them from us, I think our focus will continue to be on quality rather than quantity. I don't know if we'll get to a point where we hurt our quality. I don't think so. I don't think we'll ever get that big. So we're just going to go cautiously and we're not cutting any corners. About three years ago, I said to my wife, "You know what? Every time we expand, we're building a bigger estate for our kids at our own expense," and I said, "If we're going to expand too much more, let them do it on their time and money when they own the place and they're in charge. Let's go do some things and enjoy ourselves."

I don't need Silver Oak to be any bigger. My partner's a little more aggressive--both in pricing and in quantity, I'd say. But we work well together, and we've managed to work it out over

the years. But I think for the future, that's going to be our policy on quality and quantity.

I think in the Napa Valley things are going to be more difficult than in Sonoma County; we've got all kinds of regulations here about planting grapes. They don't like you to plant grapes on the hillside because of the erosion. They claim you're silting up the river, as if the cities and their development didn't silt up the river. So it's getting more and more difficult to get anything done in this county. That's why primarily our expansion has been in the Alexander Valley and why it's 80 percent of our production. We have more vineyards and more grapes and it's easier to get things built and do things.

Alexander Valley Winegrowers

Hicke: While we're on that, tell me about founding the Alexander Valley Winegrowers.

Meyer: Well, I was invited to be on that founding board, and the idea was--I think some of us, I wouldn't like to say this out loud to our neighbors, but there are about seven appellations in Sonoma County, and we feel that Alexander Valley produces the best wine. We needed to publicize Alexander Valley and not throw ourselves into the pot with Sonoma. So we've been trying to do things--some of them you're aware of--that would shine the spotlight on the Alexander Valley. That was the whole idea, as I understood, of the open houses and seminars and other things that would bring attention to Alexander Valley and its ability to produce varied wines of good quality--whether it be Chardonnay or Cabernet or Zinfandel and so on.

Hicke: When was it founded? Do you have some idea just in general?

Meyer: Six, seven years ago.

Hicke: It's fairly recent.

Meyer: Yes.

Hicke: Are you still on the board?

Meyer: No. But I think our office manager in the Alexander Valley, I think she took my place on the board. I don't know for sure whether she's on it or not.

Travels

Hicke: Also, I want to ask you about your travels. You didn't do any traveling for Christian Brothers, but since then you have, right? Both for fun and for profit, let's say.

Meyer: I've done some traveling. I'm not a great traveler and I'm very content at home. My wife wants to travel more than I do, but we're not exactly stay-at-homes. We've been to Argentina, where we own some racehorses.

Hicke: Oh, you do! How exciting.

Meyer: We did some world-class trout fishing and visited Mendoza. We've been to Australia, because our son who majored in biology at Lewis and Clark, he did a semester in Adelaide, University of Adelaide, so when he got out, we went over and met him and took three weeks to tour the country and visited some wineries and the rain forest and the Great Barrier Reef and things like that.

We've been to France. My older boy, in between high school and college, spent the year in France. He was a very good French student and he wanted to learn more about France and its customs and its languages, and so he went over there and checked into fifth year of high school in France--in Toulouse. He speaks extremely fluent French. They think he's a native when he speaks it. He lived with a fellow who's a pilot of the Concorde, which was nice, because Chad is just nuts about flying. He's got his pilot's license and his instrument license and twin engine license. Even though he's doing the web pages now, I've told him, "Chad, you should be a pilot and do the web pages on the side. You're so enamored with flying. Do what you enjoy. Don't worry about the money. It'll happen. You'll make out all right."

So we've been to France and Switzerland. But I don't consider us prolific travelers--I don't want to go to any third world countries. I don't care to see China or Africa or some of those places. A priest friend of mine, a Dominican priest, he was sixty years old when he went over to Africa to be a missionary, and I thought, "What a hero. I couldn't do that." I just wouldn't do it. At that stage of life to retrain yourself, it's just a tough road. I don't even like to go to Mexico for vacation, because they're so arbitrary down there. You don't know what the rules are. They can throw you in jail and not even tell you why they did it and never let you see a lawyer. I'd much rather go to Hawaii where I understand the rules and understand the language--although I speak Spanish.

We intend to do more traveling, especially now that our three children are gone. The two boys just finished college in June and our daughter just started college in September, so none of them are living at home, so it's kind of a big change. I kind of like it. It's nice to come home at night and say, "Put those leftovers back in the refrigerator. Let's go out to dinner." We don't have any kids to worry about or any schedules to keep.

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: When we went to France, I told Bonny, "I'm going to make appointments with some of the top Bordeaux chateaux I want to see, but I will only take one of the three weeks to visit wineries and the rest will just be vacation." For instance, she doesn't do a lot of winery public relations or other things. If I have a dinner back at the winery with a group, she may not even come, because she doesn't want to hear about wine. She's heard it all. You know?

Napa Agricultural Preserve

Hicke: Yes. Well, maybe we have time to go on just a few of the things that have happened in the Napa Valley. Why don't you just pick out what you think is important from the outline?

Meyer: The most important, as far as I'm concerned, is the Agriculture Preserve. It's a county ordinance that you can't divide a parcel into less than forty acres anymore. If it's an existing parcel, they can't change that, but if you had--for instance, if you had a sixty-acre piece, you couldn't subdivide it, because it won't make two forties.

The idea is they don't want it to turn into a Silicon Valley. They want it to stay in agriculture, because in grape growing, you either have the soil and the climate the good Lord gave to you to make good grapes and wine, or you don't. And there are very few of them, so why turn it into houses for the Bay Area?

And so twenty-five years or so ago, we as a county voted in the AG preserve. It's got some problems. One of the problems is you lock into only agriculture, and if you can't make it in agriculture, you can't do anything else with it. So some richer guy comes along and buys it. We've got all kinds of rich, famous people--I won't name any--in this valley that own land. And they don't have to own it for an economic reason, they made plenty of

money elsewhere. So it creates kind of an artificial economy in this valley.

We just bought a vineyard. It was \$100,000 an acre for planted vineyard. Unheard of. Probably the most expensive agricultural land in the United States. You have to get quite a healthy price--you have to get our price per bottle to make that work. A young kid just out of Davis with a degree in enology or viticulture maybe can't even afford to live here. Maybe he lives in Fairfield and commutes because prices are so high. So it's got some problems that need to be worked out.

And people are moving to the hillsides, planting, and we've got the environmentalists screaming. They don't want more vineyards. They want everything like it was, and we're the great destroyers. What they don't acknowledge is we're the whole base to the economy. We're the base of the tax structure, and we got them where they are. Now, they're here, they want to lock everybody out. We're going to have to work that out.

In my way of thinking right now, we have kind of a "no growth" board of supervisors, for one. I'm hoping this election in March will change that to three to two for business. I'm not for building a bunch of houses, but we went in for an expansion program and it's going to take a year for them to okay it downtown for all the paperwork. You know, they're just dragging their feet, because they don't want anything to happen. They can't prevent it from happening, but they can drag it out for as long as possible and then put in enough stipulations on it that make it cost you 15 percent more than it would to satisfy all the requirements.

Hicke: Have they ever talked about widening the highway?

Meyer: Yes. But people here are pretty dead set against that. They say, "Oh, if you widen the highway, you only make it easier for the tourists and we don't want more tourists. It's hard enough to deal with the ones we've got." So the tourists, who got this valley economically sound, are somewhat not welcome now, because the restaurants are full of tourists and the highways are full of tourists and now they're a nuisance. But they're my customers, and the county is getting all these taxes from me, and if the tourists ever got cut out, it would all start to back up is what I think they really haven't thought out.

It's something we have to deal with. I don't think we want just rampant development, but I say, "Look, it's not the county, it's not the supervisors, it's not the environmentalists that have kept this land in agriculture; it's the grape growers. And you

guys are all taking credit for it, and telling us what we should do with our land. You know, we're going to keep it in open space, but hopefully it'll be profitable to do so." So it's got some problems.

Wine Train

Meyer: [looking at outline] The wine train is another thing that has stirred up a lot of controversy. First of all, because the owner of the wine train, he came in here and when people said, "Well, what do you plan to do?" he says, "None of your business. When I do it, you'll see what I'm going to do." Well, that started the fight right off.

Hicke: This is De Dominico?

Meyer: De Dominico, right. He came out with this big spiel that the wine train is going to take tourists off the highway and they're going to ride a train. Well, nobody's going to go visit a winery and carry a case of wine a mile to the train and get on, but you're going to bring the train lovers into Napa Valley, so you got more tourists now. And it's crossing the highway a couple times, so in places it's stopping traffic. It's been a big controversy, ongoing.

I don't know if he's making any money or if he's just stubborn. I've heard he's losing money and his kids are trying to get him to forsake the thing and sell it to BART. If this was a BART railing and I could get to San Francisco airport, now it does something for a local; or if my kid could ride the train from Oakville to Napa, where they go to high school, now it does something for our local.

But all they have is about a sixty-minute dinner ride where you go up the valley at a snail's pace, and one group eats on the way up and one group eats on the way back, so it's more of a tourist draw. It's more of a Disneyland attraction than anything serviceable. So he's got himself crossways with some pretty prominent people like Vera Trinchero Torres of Sutter Home. She's fighting him at every turn. And they're still fighting him. The city of St. Helena won't even let passengers get off the train in St. Helena because they said, "We're not prepared to have this huge deluge of people come out at us, to take care of them, clutter up the streets, and now we've got to build supplementary restrooms and this and that."

Hicke: I want a chance to cover some of your professional activities here, like the Wine Institute and the Napa Valley Grape Growers--whatever else you think is most important.

Meyer: You've got all of them listed there. Most of my activities have been twofold: one is involved in grape and wine kind of things, and one I have a real soft spot in my heart for kids. I've been on the board of Big Brothers and I've taught school. We give scholarships here to the local Catholic high school--about six a year--to go down there, because tuition's getting so prohibitive and I don't want to see the poorer kids not be able to go there because tuition's so high.

Hicke: You and Bonny, you're talking about?

Meyer: Yes, and Silver Oak, itself. We give some and they've set up some wine industry scholarships down there, so Silver Oak is a participant in that. So you have most of the things on the list that you sent me that I've been involved in at one time or another.

Napa Valley Vintners

Meyer: Funny thing, you've got Napa Valley Vintners. I was president, you have vice president, but I was actually president of it at one time. Now I'm no longer a member. The reason that I quit after twenty years of being a member is their wine auction has been very successful--so successful that they're trying to cut down the amount of lots they have, because they drag on for eight or ten hours. So the recommendation committee, one of the things they came up with a few years ago, was that you could not pour or auction off any wine unless it was Napa Valley, so that eliminated our whole Alexander Valley, which is 80 percent of our production. But they collect dues based on your production, whether it's Alexander or Napa. I said, "Wait a minute. I must not understand this. You're telling me you want me to pay dues on everything, but you only want me to put 20 percent of our production into your program for publicity?" I don't buy that. And Sonoma's just as bad. They want just the opposite. They want us to put only Sonoma-Alexander wines in there, but pay for all of them. So we're kind of a maverick in that we don't belong to either one of them any more. I just took some of the money that I thought I saved from not being a member and we make a substantial donation to Clinic Olé, which started out to be a clinic--a free clinic for Mexican farm workers and now it's a free clinic for just people who can't afford to pay, no matter what. And the doctors, the

nurses, donate a lot of time. The auction supplements their budget, and so we just said, "Well--

Hicke: Give it direct.

Meyer: Instead of feeding into the Vintners, we'll give it to the clinic.

Napa Valley Grape Growers

Hicke: The Napa Valley Grape Growers? Was that significant? You were a founder.

Meyer: Before we got into the wine business, when we were just growers growing all these grapes, the market wasn't too good, so a lot of us banded together and formed the Napa Valley Grape Growers, figuring we had more strength as a group to get better prices. I was on the founding board of that. Of course I'm not even a member any more, because--I wouldn't say it's an adversarial relationship--the vintners and the growers try to work closely on many projects, but they seem to be like a mongoose and cobra. Every time you get two of them together, they can't agree on whether the sun is shining or not. [laughter]

Hicke: So these were just grape growers only? They didn't make any wine.

Meyer: Only. No, you've got the Napa Valley Grape Growers, then you have the Napa Valley Vintners.

St. Helena Wine Service Co-op

Meyer: I see you've got the St. Helena Wine Service Co-op down there. That was a very good concept. I think that was started by Joe Phelps and someone else. But the idea was if we all have to build warehousing and staff it independently, our costs are going to be way up, but if we build a great, big warehouse that will handle all these little wineries that want to be members, and then we had one staff, it's going to be very efficient to build and to run. So we have a warehouse in St. Helena and one down by the airport that maybe holds three million cases of wine, each.

And we're a member. I think we own 100,000 cases of space, so when we bottle our wine, we send it up there for bottle aging, and

it sits there for a year or two. Then when we get orders for that wine, when it's being sold, we just send the order up there.

Well, you may be a wholesaler from Florida and it's to your advantage to get the wine back there as efficiently as possible. Maybe you represent fifteen Napa Valley wineries and a truckload is 1,100 cases: you'd never buy 1,100 cases of Silver Oak in one shot--maybe you'd buy 100--so you'd come in here and buy 100 from eleven different wineries and, lo and behold, they're all up there. You send your truck up and the truck gets filled with the various wines from the order and he goes off happy. So it's worked very well for all of us.

Hicke: Was that Freemark Abbey? Were they involved in that?

Meyer: Yes. Chuck Carpy and Bill Jaeger, yes.

Internet Sales

Hicke: Before I forget, I want to ask you about selling wine over the Internet.

Meyer: Well, what about it?

Hicke: How do you feel about it? Are you going to try to do it, and what do you think's going to happen?

Meyer: I have told our kids that I think they can sell all the port over the Internet. It's not illegal to sell over the Internet in California or about ten other states that have reciprocal trade agreements. The other forty or so states you can't sell in without a wholesaler. With only 1,300 cases of port, we don't have to be in those forty states. To heck with them.

So right now we're selling it all out of Silver Oak tasting rooms. When it can no longer sell it all, my son has designed a web page for Meyer Port, and we've put an order form on it, and you can send in an order over the Internet, and we'll get your visa card number and we'll service this, ship it out to you.

I'm not going to get into the whole discussion and fight about whether these states are right or wrong. I think they're good old boys who want to protect their own interest, which is why they're against the Internet, and they're coming up with this thing about, "Well, your minors will be drinking." I was just at a talk Monday of the Congressman [George] Radonovich, and he fought this thing

this year back in Washington. He said, "I said to my opponent, 'Oh, sure, when I was a kid, I used to get my Dad's credit card and order a case of thirty-dollar-a-bottle Chardonnay a month ahead of time and then have a party. And that's what they're going to do? Right? No, of course not.'" So it's a big smoke screen of the wholesalers who want a monopoly on distribution.

Some of these little wineries, the wholesaler won't take them because they have too small a quantity. So maybe they won't have any distribution in Florida because they can't ship it to a customer and the wholesaler won't take them.

I think in a small business they would probably sell all their wine like we intend to do over the Internet in the permissible states. Maybe in California. But I think that just like any other business, if you had a Levi business or you had, you name it, you can sell anywhere over the Internet, but we're kind of a victim of Prohibition and Repeal. We've still got the Prohibition attitude in many states, and the reason is they're getting big taxes off it. They want to make sure they get their taxes.

I'm sure a method can be worked out where they get their taxes and you can ship it, but then you bypass that wholesaler. So he's lobbying his state legislature that, "This is illegal. Our kids are all going to be drunkards," and so on and so forth. He's really just trying to protect his monopoly. I hear it's going to be challenged in some courts. We don't ship direct.

##

Meyer: We do business in the states where it's permissible. I said ten states--I think it's eleven. But we do have people who can order by mail-order. Of the wine we keep for our retail room, we only permit about 20 percent of it to get shipped for orders, and then we say we're out. Our wine is for people who come to the winery.

I think you should have the freedom to sell where you want. Look at the Internet. It's changing the whole world, the way you can do business. You hear about buying your groceries over the Internet--well, are the grocery stores going to be able to go to the state legislature and say it's illegal to buy your groceries over the Internet? Heck no. But they can do that on alcohol.

Top Priority: The Family

Hicke: Is there anything that you think is pretty important that we have not covered?

Meyer: You have as a very last thing here, family participation.

Hicke: Yes.

Meyer: I consider family top priority, and I don't let my work or anything interfere with it. People down here know they'd best not ever call me at home on a Saturday. I tell them, "Even if my mother shows up, you'd better not call me, or you'd better resign on Monday." But if my mother had an appointment, I'd be here. "If she shows up and I'm not here, don't bother me with her. That's family time and never the twain shall meet."

We don't try to drag a bunch of business associates home for dinner or anything like that. I bring some that we just happen to like, but we try to keep our family very distinct from our business, and say, "Well, if there's a problem with competition, family gets preference, then business comes next." That's kind of the whole way I've approached this business. It's why we close on Sundays and why we now close on holiday weekends--to try to encourage these people to kind of see--I can't dictate policy to them, but I say, "Well, this is important to me. This is what I'm going to do. And you have the right to do it, because you've got the day off." I would be very delighted if some of my kids got in the business, but right now my oldest is showing no interest. He's in the web page business. My second one says he's going to go to Davis and come into the business, although he says that Napa's too crowded and Silver Oak's too big.

Hicke: Well, he might like Anderson Valley.

Meyer: Yes. I took him up there and I said, "Boy, if you want not crowded, it's here."

My daughter may get into it indirectly with graphic arts. But we've made a deliberate effort not to make them feel any pressure either to drink or to be in the business--and let them choose their own.

As far as the drinking, I talk about a little bit in the book, but I really think you teach your kids how to drink. If they see that wine is to complement a meal and taste good--our boy, our oldest boy, went to Boston College and he called back and he said, "You know, Dad, these freshmen--all they want to do is drink beer

and get drunk on weekends, and I have no interest in doing that. I want to go to some concerts or something else. Drinking's no big deal. If I want a glass of wine with my dinner --but just to go drink beer until I get bombed is not a great thing." But because they probably weren't permitted to drink at home, they think it's the forbidden fruit, and as soon as they get a chance they go wild. So I think that some of our laws and customs in the US are not conducive to teaching people that binge drinking, for instance, isn't where it's at.

Drinking a martini with dinner isn't where it's at for me. Nor is drinking milk. I might drink some milk for lunch. I rarely drink at lunch, but I'll have wine on the table probably every night and have a glass or two with my dinner.

So I think we have a lot of education to do. I think there's a good future for the wine business. You can never predict this thing. It's gone up and down so many times. And I think we're at a very high point. I've never seen the wine business so good in my--what, I've been in it since '64, so thirty-five years. I've never seen it so good, but it may go down again. We may get a glut and--who knows? But I think there's terrific opportunity in the business. I think we need to teach people how to drink correctly, and I put a very high value on family.

Hicke: That's a great note to stop on. I thank you very, very much for a thoughtful interview.

Meyer: Okay.

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R. Justin Meyer

Education

Grammar School - Bakersfield, CA.

Garces High School - Bakersfield

Bakersfield Community College

St. Mary's College, Moraga. B. A. Economics

Minor: Spanish, Speech. Education

University of California, Davis. B. S. Viticulture and Enology
M. S. Horticulture

Work Experience

1972 - Present President, V & E Consulting and Management
Company. Consulting offered in Viticulture,
Enology, Financing, budgets, loan procurement,
Marketing, Sales, acquisitions.

1972 - Present Owner and Winemaker, Silver Oak Cellars;
Oakville, CA. Producing only five year
old Cabernet Sauvignon.

1975 - 1981 President and Winemaker of Franciscan Vineyards,
Inc. Rutherford, CA. In charge of all phases
of production, administration, financing, sales
and marketing. 844,000 gallon capacity. 100,000
case distribution in 46 states. 500 acres vineyards.

1968 - 1972 Assistant Cellarmaster, Christian Brothers
winery. Second in charge of winemaking.
In charge of some 1,300 acres of Napa Valley
vineyards. Bought all grapes of independent
grape suppliers in Napa Valley. Board of
Directors - Mont La Salle Vineyards.

1965 - 1968 Student; University of California at Davis.

1964 - 1965 Winery and vineyard trainee, Christian Brothers.

1962 - 1964 Teacher, Christian Brothers High School,
Sacramento, CA. Spanish, Math, Athletics.

Professional Organizations

American Society of Enologists - Professional Member

Napa Valley Wine Technical Group

Napa Valley Vineyard Technical Group

Wine Institute - Grape and Wine Quality Committee

Napa Valley Vintners - Vice President and Executive Committee

St. Helena Wine Service Co-op; Board of Directors

Wine Institute; Board of Directors

Speak Spanish Fluently

Private Pilot's license

Hobbies: guitar, banjo, hike, fish

R. Justin Meyer

LIST OF COMMUNITY AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Professional Wine Associations:

1. American Vineyard Foundation
2. Napa Valley Grape Growers Association: founder, 1975
3. American Society of Enologists
4. Wine Institute: director, Grape and Wine Quality Committee
5. Napa Valley Wine Technical Group
6. Napa Valley Vineyard Technical Group
7. Napa Valley Vintners, president
8. St. Helena Wine Service Co-op: director
9. *Plain Talk About Fine Wine*
10. Teaching Wine Appreciation



WINERY

CONCEPT

Silver Oak was started in 1972 with a simple, but underlying belief: That wine should taste good when consumed, and that this taste expectation should be delivered whenever a consumer buys a bottle of wine. That wasn't the prevailing experience then for Cabernet Sauvignon consumers, as the trend among serious producers was to make wines for long maturing periods which were very harsh tasting upon release.

Our concept developed around how we believed a great Cabernet Sauvignon should taste at its peak, and the desire to make wines that could also be enjoyed upon first release. This led to our extended aging program and the particular character of Silver Oak.

METHOD

- Make Cabernet Sauvignon only - singleness of purpose
- Age in oak barrels for up to 30 months
- Use all new barrels for each vintage of Napa Valley
- Use 1/2 new and 1/2 once-used 57 gallon barrels for the Alexander Valley, blend before bottling.
- Fire bent (toasted) American oak from Kentucky and Missouri
- Bottle age for twelve to eighteen months to develop bouquet
- Re-release program - to make older vintages available for sale at the winery only

SILVER OAK CELLARS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

P.O. BOX 414 OAKVILLE, CALIFORNIA 94562



A TIMELINE HISTORY OF THE DUNCAN-MEYER PARTNERSHIP

- JULY, 1972 Justin R. Meyer and Raymond T. Duncan became partners. Their goals were to plant vineyard and manage 750 acres of land that Duncan owned in the Napa and Alexander Valleys and start a Cabernet Sauvignon-only winery (Meyer's idea).
- OCTOBER, 1972 Approximately 15 tons of Cabernet Sauvignon grapes from the Alexander Valley vineyards were crushed.
- 1973 & 1974 Vineyards were planted and two more vintages of Cabernet crushed and barrel-aged in the old Oakville Dairy buildings.
- 1975 Duncan & Meyer bought 280 acres of land in Lake County and planted more vineyard.
- JULY, 1975 Silver Oak's first vintage (1100 cases) was hand filled and corked in front of the dairy.
- AUGUST, 1975 Duncan & Meyer purchased Franciscan Winery from bankruptcy. Silver Oak's grapes were crushed and bottled at Franciscan from 1975-1981.
- DECEMBER, 1979 Franciscan Winery sold to the Eckes Company of Germany.
- MAY, 1981 Justin Meyer resigned as President and Winemaker of Franciscan and started plans for a new Silver Oak facility.

SILVER OAK CELLARS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

P.O. BOX 414, OAKVILLE, CALIFORNIA 94562



WINERY

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| FALL, 1982 | Construction of Silver Oak, Napa Valley was complete and the 1979 vintage was bottled in the new Oakville facility. |
| SPRING, 1987 | Completed a 9,000 sq. ft. crushing and bottling addition. |
| DECEMBER, 1992 | Silver Oak purchased an existing winery in the Alexander Valley to crush, ferment and age our Alexander Valley Wines. |
| AUGUST, 1996 | Completed a 10,000 sq. ft. barrel cellar addition to Silver Oak, Alexander Valley. |

SILVER OAK CELLARS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

P.O. BOX 414 OAKVILLE CALIFORNIA 94562

America's
Most Popular Cabernet



SILVER OAK

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Silver Oak Cabernet Sauvignon again ranks **#1** in Wine & Spirits' 9th annual survey of top end restaurants.

This is the fourth year in a row that Silver Oak was acclaimed America's most popular Cabernet by the most highly regarded restaurateurs across the country.

Silver Oak again raised its point total to a record 299, largely on the basis of its Alexander Valley appellation.

"There are larger producers further down the list, but dominance of the heavily allocated wine tells the story."



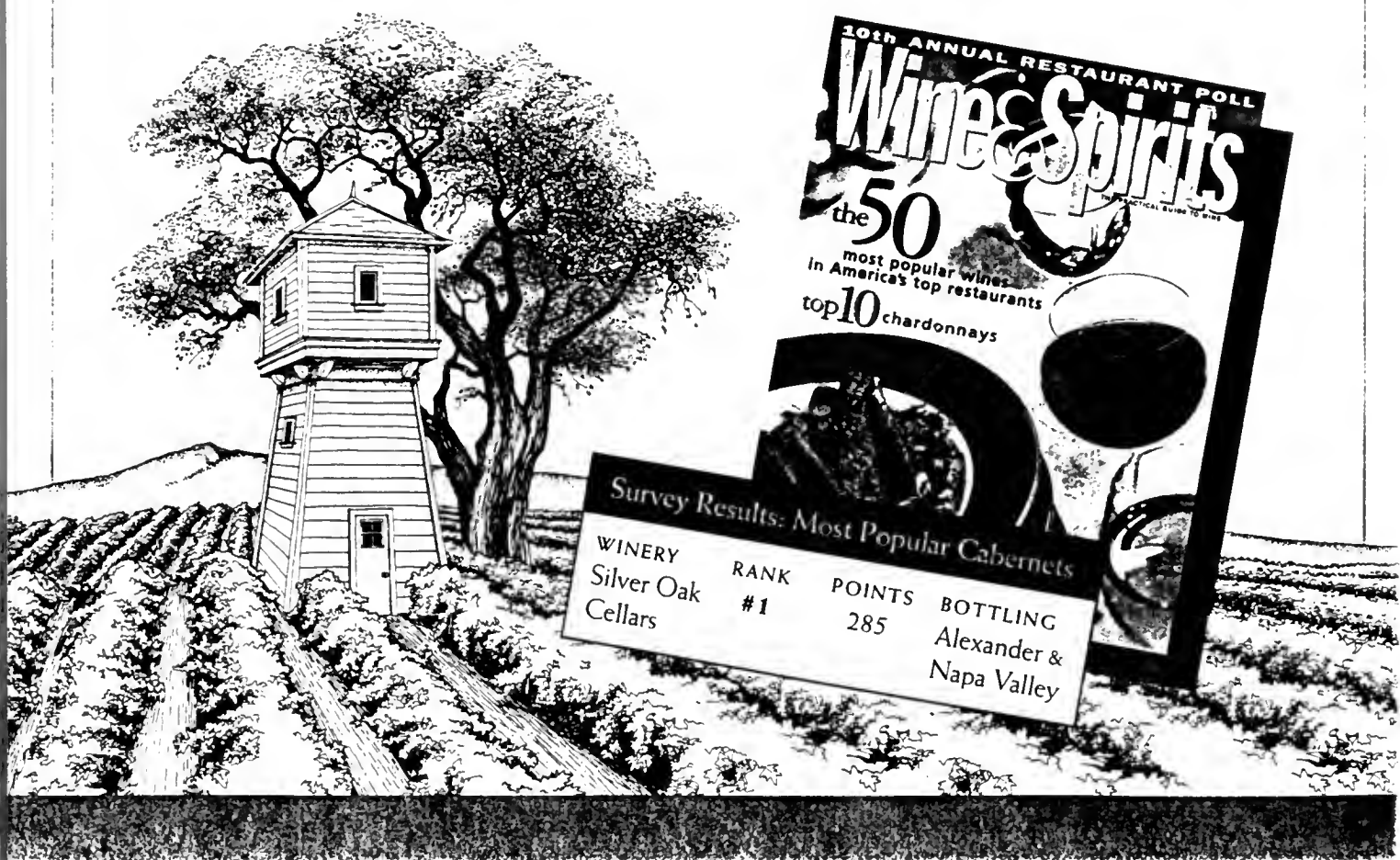
Survey Results: Most Popular Cabernets

Winery	Rank	Points	Bottling
Silver Oak Cellars Oakville, CA	#1	299	Alexander Valley Napa Valley

Silver Oak Ranks Number 1 Again!

Wine & Spirits Annual Survey of Restaurants

This is the fifth year in a row that Silver Oak was acclaimed America's most popular Cabernet by America's most highly regarded restaurateurs. Silver Oak's score of 285 was highest among all red wines. With fewer steakhouses and more seafood restaurants reporting this year, Silver Oak's appeal with a wide variety of foods maintains its leadership among America's most popular restaurants.



Survey Results: Most Popular Cabernets

WINERY	RANK	POINTS	BOTTLING
Silver Oak Cellars	#1	285	Alexander & Napa Valley



SILVER OAK CELLARS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

VINTAGE: 1995

APPELLATION: Alexander Valley

COMPOSITION: 100% Cabernet Sauvignon

BOTTLE SIZES:	750 mls	6.0L bottles
	1.5L magnums	12L bottles
	3.0L double magnums	18L bottles

VINTAGE DESCRIPTION:

The winter of 1995 will long be remembered for two "100 year" floods. Twenty eight days of rain caused floods in January, and after a dry February, heavy storms in early March brought additional flooding in parts of Napa and Sonoma.

Damage to vineyards was minimal – some trellis damage and clean up from overflowing rivers and streams, but the Cabernet Sauvignon was dormant, so the vines were unaffected. Spring continued cool and wet which made it difficult to get into the vineyards for cultivation. Rain during bloom gave a lighter than normal set with loose clusters. Summer and fall were mild and this enabled the grapes to develop full aromatic and tannic maturity. A warming trend in September and October ripened the fruit to ideal levels.

WINEMAKING:

We began picking in Alexander Valley with our Rivers Edge vineyard on October 2nd. We then moved to Miraval and finished with the Red Tail vineyard on October 24th. The wines were fermented in jacketed stainless steel tanks with maximum temperatures of 86 degrees. Malolactic fermentations were also conducted in tank. Blends were made and barreled down in early 1996. The 100% Alexander Valley Cabernet was aged in 50% new and 50% once used American Oak barrels for about thirty months before bottling.

TASTING NOTES:

The 1995 Alexander Valley has a dark ruby color and luscious nose of blackberry, cassis and chocolate, with hints of soy sauce. It has great depth and harmony and a smooth, long, slightly tannic finish. It will need a year to smooth out, and will continue to improve for years with proper storage.

RELEASE DATE:

Saturday, July 31, 1999

SILVER OAK CELLARS



POST OFFICE BOX 558
GEYSERVILLE, CALIFORNIA 95441
TEL 707 857 3562
FAX 707 857 3134
www.silveroak.com

SILVER OAK CELLARS

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Welcome to Silver Oak Cellars

CURRENT RELEASE WINE

Please note that the purchase of the **1995 Alexander Valley 750ml** is limited to 1 bottle per person per day. Large bottles: 1 bottle per person.

1995	Alexander Valley	750ml	\$50.00
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NEW! Available only at the Winery- No purchase limits

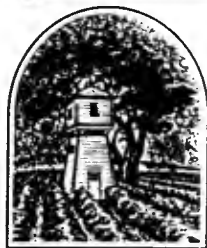
MEYER FAMILY PORT	500ml	\$25.00
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We can ship wine to the following states:

California	Oregon	Iowa	Illinois
Colorado	Washington	Minnesota	Wisconsin
Idaho	West Virginia	Missouri	New Mexico

NOTE:As you travel through the wine country please be aware that temperature variations can adversely affect your wine. Proper storage inside your car can protect your purchases.

October 9, 1999



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SILVER OAK CELLARS
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

Welcome to Silver Oak Cellars

CELLAR WINES

Limit: 1 bottle per person per day and vintage.

3.0L

1983 Alexander Valley	550.
1983 Bonny's Vineyard	
1982 Bonny's Vineyard	
1980 Alexander Valley	625.

November 12, 1999



The WINE ADVOCATE®

An Independent consumer's bimonthly guide to Fine Wine

RATING SYSTEM

The WINE ADVOCATE's rating system employs a 50-100 point quality scale. It is my belief that the various twenty (20) point rating systems do not provide enough flexibility and often result in compressed and inflated wine ratings. The WINE ADVOCATE takes a hard, very critical look at wine, since it would prefer to underestimate the wine's quality than to overestimate it. The numerical ratings are utilized only to enhance and complement the thorough tasting notes, which are my primary means of communicating my judgments to you.

95-100

An extraordinary wine of profound and complex character displaying all the attributes expected of a classic wine of its variety. Wines of this caliber are worth a special effort to find and purchase.

90-94

An outstanding wine of great complexity and character.

85-89

A good to very good wine displaying considerable finesse and character with no noticeable flaws.

75-79

An average wine with little distinction except that it is a soundly made everyday table wine.

60-64

A below average wine containing noticeable flaws.

50-54

A wine to be avoided.

SILVER OAK CELLARS

1994	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	ALEXANDER VALLEY	(\$32.00; release date, 8/98)	(92-94)
1993	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	ALEXANDER VALLEY	(\$32.00; release date, 8/97)	93
1992	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	ALEXANDER VALLEY	(\$32.00; release date, 8/96)	93
1994	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	NAPA VALLEY	(\$40.00; release date, 2/99)	(94-96)
1993	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	NAPA VALLEY	(\$40.00; release date, 2/98)	94+
1992	CABERNET SAUVIGNON	NAPA VALLEY	(\$40.00; release date, 2/97)	96

Under the reign of Justin Meyer, **Silver Oak Cellars** has become one of the great success stories of California, partly because **Justin Meyer** realized twenty years ago (before many of his peers) that wine should be a beverage of joy. His formula is simple, (1) pick very ripe fruit, (2) age it almost 30 months in mostly new **American Oak barrels**, and (3) bottle the wine without stripping out its perfume and flavor. When they are released, The **Silver Oak Cabernets** are out and out **delicious** - there is simply no other way to describe them. My reservations about their ageability have disappeared as some of the rich, flashy vintages of the mid-eighties (1984 and 1985) remain as ostentatious and sumptuous as ever. My only criticism is that **Silver Oak fans** drink up the 10,000 cases of **Napa Cabernet Sauvignon** long before anyone has a chance to find out how well these wines hold up. Future releases are all **immensely impressive**, sumptuous, overly oaky, ravishing examples of **All-American Cabernet Sauvignon** that will stop tasters dead in their tracks with their blasts of ripe fruit and spice.

The **1992s** (the **Alexander Valley** will be released in **August, 1996** and the **Napa Valley** in **February, 1997**) are beautifully made, flashy wines. The dark ruby-colored **1992 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** reveals a big, smoky herb, lavishly woody nose intermingled with jammy black-cherry and cassis scents. Full-bodied, opulent, thick, and juicy, this wine should drink well when released and **last for 12-15 years** thereafter. The **1992 Napa Cabernet Sauvignon** exhibits a denser color, less

of the Alexander Valley herb/cedar/cigar box nose, and more of the gorgeously pure, cassis, vanilla and flowery scents. The **rich, deep, supple 1992** possesses low acidity and exceptional ripeness and concentration. It should **last 15 years** after its release.

The **1993s** are revealing even finer integration of toasty new **American Oak**. The full-bodied **1993 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** offers peppery, blackcurrent-scented aromas, as well as gobs of cherry and cassis fruit. Approachable now, it should **drink well for 10-20 years** as I detect more tannin and structure. The **1993 Cabernet Sauvignon Napa** (this wine now includes the **Bonny's Vineyard** fruit as that cuvee has been discontinued because tiny quantities made allocation virtually impossible) is a super-concentrated, dense youthful, moderately tannic wine with great fruit, ripeness, and length. It is extremely unevolved and young for a Silver Oak Cabernet Sauvignon, but it will not be released until **February, 1998**.

The **1994 Silver Oak** offerings look spectacular, confirming this vintage's unreal level of quality. Both the **1994 Napa Cabernet Sauvignon** and the **1994 Alexander Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** should prove to be **mega-hits** when they are released. Friends tell me the release day party at **Silver Oak** is not to be missed, as the winery is besieged by fans. Thousands of just **plain folks** arrive to lay claim to their allocations of Silver Oak Cabernet (707) 944-8808; Fax (707) 944-2817.

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